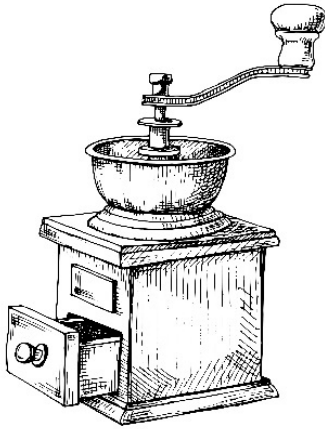




MARIANNE'S
MAIL ORDER
BRIDES

A Match for Victoria

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
CHRISTINE STERLING



A MATCH FOR VICTORIA

Marianne's Mail Order Brides #6

Christine Sterling

A MATCH FOR VICTORIA

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are all products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblances to persons, organizations, events, or locales are entirely coincidental.

The book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. All rights are reserved with the exceptions of quotes used in reviews. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage system without express written permission from the author.

Scriptures quoted from the King James Holy Bible.

A Match for Victoria ©2021 Christine Sterling
Cover Design by Virginia McKevitt
Editing by Carolyn Leggo, Amy Petrowich, and
Amber Downey



www.christinesterling.com

1st Ed, 08/2021

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Get Free Books](#)

[A Match for Victoria](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Marianne's Mail Order Brides](#)

[Leave a Review](#)

[Read all of Christine's Books](#)

[About Christine Sterling](#)

LICENSE NOTE

This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

-- Christine Sterling

GET FREE BOOKS

Join Christine's Chat, Sip & Read newsletter to stay updated with new releases, get free books, access to exclusive bonus content, and more!

[Join Christine's newsletter here.](#)

[Tap here to see all of Christine's books.](#)

[Click here to join the Chat, Sip & Read Readers Community.](#)



A MATCH FOR VICTORIA

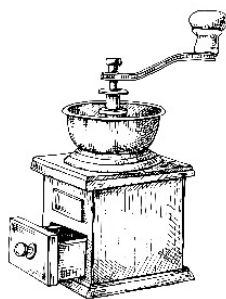
Victoria Rossi has lost everything. After her beloved father dies, her stepmother reduces her to nothing more than a scullery maid!

Desperate to leave her situation, she answers an advertisement for mail order brides and hops the next train to Denver. Imagine her surprise when the man she was supposed to marry died before she arrived. With nowhere to go and few funds to her name, she enlists the help of a local matchmaker to find her a husband. What she didn't expect was Josiah Altland and his two little charges.

Josiah Altland knows nothing about children or housekeeping. When his brother is killed in a tragic accident, Josiah is named guardian of his two nieces. He has a busy haberdashery to run and can't spend time chasing after two little girls. When he learns about a woman his brother was to marry, it is the answer to his prayers. He offers Victoria a marriage of convenience, but he doesn't expect to fall in love.

When Victoria's family comes to claim her, will she be forced to leave behind the family

she has come to love?



CHAPTER ONE



April 1875, New Jersey

Victoria Rossi shivered under the covers.

The sun hadn't yet appeared in the sky, but she knew it would soon. If she didn't have the fires stoked, then she would have to deal with her stepmother, Desdemona, and her spoiled half-sister, Jezebel. Victoria pulled her sleep cap further down her head and counted to one hundred before sitting up in bed. Rubbing her arms, she crawled out from the warm blankets and slid her feet into the slippers resting on the floor.

The slippers did nothing to keep her feet warm. The fabric was so thin and worn, and she didn't have a spare pair. Desdemona

ensured that. When Victoria managed to get a new pair, she hadn't worn them twice before Jezebel stole them. When Victoria tried to reclaim them, she could still feel the sting of Desdemona hitting her with a wooden spoon. She never tried to take anything back after that, apart from her two most prized possessions, a locket her mother gave her and a riding habit her father purchased right before his death. Victoria didn't even care that she couldn't move for two days after taking them from Jezebel.

Stoking the fire, she was careful not to use too many pieces of wood. Once a flame appeared, she washed in the cold water in her washbasin and dressed in a plain blue day dress covered with a stained linen apron. Before making her bed, she twisted her hair in a tight knot and shoved it under a plain white cotton day cap.

As she pulled the sheet up over the straw-filled mattress, she heard footsteps coming down the hall.

Someone was up!

The thud of the heel indicated it was Byron, Desdemona's younger brother. There were three bedrooms upstairs: Victoria's, Bryon's, and Jezebel's. Desdemona had a large

bedroom downstairs.

It sounded like Bryon was headed towards the main staircase at the front of the house.

She should have never stayed in bed.

Desdemona was going to be furious if the water wasn't heated and the fires stoked in their rooms.

Victoria would have to make her bed later. She tossed the blankets over the mattress and slipped out the door to the back steps that led directly to the servant's entrance for the kitchen. Running on her toes, she prayed she would get there before Byron.

The room was empty as she raced to the stove and picked up the enamel coffee pot. As she turned, the door slammed open, and Byron stood in the doorway.

"You're finally up." He curled his lip in disgust. "I don't know why my sister keeps you." He walked over to the table and pulled out a chair, scraping it along the floor. Victoria winced. She would have to spend time rubbing the scratch marks out of the floor. "I suppose it is because she has a kind heart."

Victoria suppressed a snort. There was nothing kind about Desdemona. The kindest thing Victoria could say is that the woman did

love her father. Victoria knew that the woman didn't want to raise a child from another woman.

It was a very passive-aggressive game Desdemona played. Desdemona was tolerant in front of Victoria's father, but her stepmother's true colors came out after her father died.

Victoria became a servant in her own home, and nothing she did was good enough for her stepmother. Jezebel tried to stay out of the way, as Victoria was her sister. Byron, on the other hand, took much delight in trying to get Victoria in trouble.

It appeared that this was one of those times.

Why her father tolerated his wife's brother living with them, she would never know. But her father did everything Desdemona wanted to keep the peace in the house. Even if it meant allowing her brother to live upstairs.

Victoria raised her shoulders and stood in front of the table. "You are going to wake up your sister with that slamming. Excuse me, I have to make the coffee."

She filled the coffee pot with several eggshells and a scoop of coffee she had dried out from the previous pot. It would have to do. Desdemona was very stingy with the

coffers. Several times Victoria had to sneak into her hidden stash of money to make purchases.

She currently had several hundred dollars hidden under the floorboards beneath her bed. If Desdemona, Jezebel, or Byron found that, she knew it would be gone in an instant.

She had plans for that money. Plans that would take her far away from Uniontown.

Once the coffee was on the stove and the cookstove fire tended, Victoria went into Jezebel's room first to stoke the fire in the fireplace. The room was dark as Victoria entered silently.

Her half-sister's delicate snores could be heard from beneath the covers. Jezebel didn't wear a sleeping cap, so her dark hair spread over the pillowcase. It was going to be a bear to brush out. There wasn't much she could do about it, so she added a few pieces of wood to the fire and made a mental note that the wood box would need to be filled.

Now she had to do Desdemona's bedroom. She dreaded going into that room.

She would spend hours with her father in the study that connected to the bedroom. They would discuss the latest books and play chess on a teak board with ivory pieces that papa

brought back from the orient. After papa died, Desdemona made sure to sell everything in the library, including Victoria's chess set.

Her father made his fortune as a merchant, traveling around the world for treasures that he would sell at his warehouse along the waterfront dividing New Jersey from New York. It was on one of these trips he met Desdemona. Both recent widows, it made sense for them to marry. Desdemona became pregnant very quickly, and it was shortly after they married that Byron moved in.

Victoria didn't like the way he looked at her, so she tried to avoid him as much as possible. Some days were better than others.

Victoria sighed. Rolling back on her heels, she heard Jezebel talk in her sleep and roll over, pulling a pillow close to her side. Victoria tiptoed out of the room and pulled the door closed behind her. If she were fortunate, Jezebel would sleep the entire morning away.

It only took a minute to stoke the fire in Desdemona's room. Collecting the tray of dirty dishes from next to her bed, Victoria headed back to the kitchen to begin working on breakfast.

Byron was nowhere in sight when she

returned, and if she was lucky, she wouldn't see him for the rest of the day either.

Quickly placing the dishes in a bucket to soak, she moved the coffee to the trivet next to the stove. The large frying pan went on the burner to start heating up with a small spoonful of grease. While she waited for it to melt, she pulled out a loaf of bread and began slicing the thick pieces for toasting in the wire rack.

Using an iron handle, she removed one of the burners, so the flames licked up from the wood box below. She gingerly laid the rack of toast over the flame and checked the skillet, giving it a quick swirl to spread the grease around.

She was cracking eggs in a bowl when Bryon reappeared. He was dressed in dark pants and a light jacket. She gave the eggs a quick whisk with a fork and poured them into the hot grease.

"Do you want coffee?" she asked, stirring the eggs.

"Do we have pork?" He grabbed a cup and reached to get the coffee pot.

"No," Victoria said softly. "It wasn't in the budget this week."

"Well, make sure it is *in the budget*," he

mocked. "I have never seen someone so inept at making their dollars last. I'm surprised we have any food at all the way you spend money."

Victoria froze as he moved closer. She could see that his cup was filled as he placed the enamel pot back on the stove. "I'll try to do better, Byron," she whispered.

"Maybe you could eat less," he said, his eyes creeping over her. Victoria felt a shiver race down her spine. Her hands started trembling. "Looks like you've packed on a few pounds. I'll mention it to my sister."

"No," Victoria whispered. "Don't. Please don't." She knew what Desdemona would do. Victoria would be locked in her room without food for two days. She barely ate as it was -- mostly leftovers, as she wasn't allowed a meal until everyone else was finished. Some days Desdemona, Bryon and Jezebel purposely ate everything so there were no leftovers.

"Then perhaps I can help you." Bryon ran his finger over Victoria's shoulder. "I won't tell Desdemona, but you'll need to do something for me."

Victoria's eyes snapped to him. "What?"

"I'll let you know when the time is right."

Bryon turned his wrist with an exaggerated movement, and Victoria watched as the hot coffee covered the eggs.

She gasped and looked at him. "What did you do that for?"

Anger flitted over Byron's features. Before he could respond, Desdemona's shrill voice filled the air.

"Victoria! Where's my coffee?"

Bryon put his hands up in the air and tossed the cup into the bucket of soaking dishes. "You better get busy, Vic-tor-i-a. Desdemona doesn't like to be kept waiting." He turned on his heel and headed out the door.

Desdemona called her name once more. "I'm coming, stepmother," Victoria responded. She eyed the mess in the pan. Congealed eggs floated in a sea of pale coffee. Sighing, she lifted the pan, dumped out the liquid, and wiped the pan with a towel. She didn't have many eggs left and no money for four days. She would have to resort to making oatmeal for the rest of the week.

Adding two eggs to the pan, she stirred them before leaving them to cook. Pulling out two plates, she placed them on the table and, using a fork, lifted the bread from the grate

and flipped it over so the other side could brown.

When the eggs and toast were done, she poured a cup of weak coffee and added a splash of milk, just as Desdemona liked it. She put the plate, cup, and silverware on a tray and carried it to the back bedroom.

The fire gave enough of a glow that she could see to sit the tray down.

“Good morning,” Victoria said, moving around to open the window shades and allowing light into the room.

“You silly chit,” Desdemona said. “I’ve been waiting for nearly ten minutes. And don’t say you were in the kitchen all this time. I know you came into the room late.”

“My apologies, stepmother. I made you eggs and toast this morning.” Victoria lifted the tray and set it across Desdemona’s lap.

“Where is Bryon?” Desdemona demanded. “I thought I heard him.” She lifted her fork and picked at her eggs.

“He left, stepmother. He didn’t tell me where he was going.”

Desdemona sniffed and took a bite of her eggs. “He’ll be home later. I can talk to him then.” She lifted her cup and took a sip before spitting it out on her breakfast. “What is

wrong with this coffee? It tastes like water and milk.” She threw the cup at Victoria, the warm liquid staining her apron as it ran towards her knees. “You are doing this on purpose, aren’t you?”

“No-”

Desdemona lifted her hand in the air. “Do not talk back to me, Victoria. I do everything for you. All I ask is a bit of respect in return.” She waved her hands over the tray. “Get this out of here and get yourself cleaned up. We are going to have visitors this morning.”

“Visitors?” Victoria rushed to remove the tray. Desdemona threw the covers off her and slid from the bed.

“Yes. You are nearly nineteen now. You should be getting married. The only reason I’ve not pressed it before now is that I know you are still mourning your father.”

“He was your husband,” Victoria whispered.

“Ambrose was that. He served his purpose.”

“Purpose?”

“Why, yes. He got me out of my situation, and now I own this house, and soon I will own his company. Or at least Jizzie will. I need to find her a husband soon. She is fifteen, after

all.”

Victoria was three when her father married Desdemona. “But --,” Victoria’s head hurt.

“You will marry Byron.” Victoria felt her grip slip on the tray she was holding. *Marry Bryon?* Desdemona walked to the wardrobe and opened the doors. “It has been decided. The preacher is coming this afternoon to discuss the details.” She pulled out a dress. “I think this one will do nicely, don’t you?” Victoria was in such a state of shock she couldn’t respond. “Victoria just don’t stand there. Get yourself dressed.”

“I—I don’t have anything.”

“What?” Desdemona looked annoyed. “You certainly have something.” Victoria shook her head. Jezebel had taken all her dresses, but she didn’t want to bring that to Desdemona’s attention. Her stepmother put her hands on her hips. “Very well. Ask Jezzie to loan you a dress. And you’ll need to make sure we have coffee on hand. And bake a cake. We can’t allow the preacher to think we don’t know how to treat a guest.”

“We don’t have any fresh coffee.”

“Why ever not?”

“We’ve used everything. I had to rebrew the same grounds.”

Desdemona moved so quickly Victoria didn't see it until the sound of a hand striking her cheek filled the air. The tray clanged against the ground, and eggs went everywhere. Victoria put her hand against her cheek and gasped.

She saw Desdemona's teeth clench and her lips move. "You will go to the store and get what you need for the pastor's visit."

"I don't have any money...."

Desdemona raised her hand once more. "You wasteful girl. I give you money, and this is how you repay me? I don't care how you get it. Just make sure you do." She sliced her arm through the air. "Get this mess cleaned up. I'm going to go see Jezzie."

Victoria watched as Desdemona waltzed from the room. Once she was alone, she fell to her knees and started to gather the tossed plate and food. Her skirt was warm, and she prayed the coffee hadn't burnt her skin underneath.

Her eyes and throat burned as she tried not to cry. The heat radiated from her cheek, and Victoria was sure there would be bruising by evening. *Why did her father have to die?* She barely remembered her mother, but everything about her father was vivid in her

mind.

It was all so sudden.

He was perfectly healthy one day and in bed with a fever the next. Within a week, he was gone.

He had doctors and lawyers visiting during that time. Victoria had never seen so many people coming and going from the house. Once he was gone, the loneliness crept in unlike anything Victoria had ever experienced.

Now she was being forced to marry Byron!

The thought made her want to retch. There was nothing she could do, and the preacher certainly wouldn't be any help. Desdemona contributed heavily to the church. He wouldn't do anything to risk losing one of his most significant contributors.

As she gathered the scraps with her fingers and plopped them on the plate, she noticed a paper sticking out from underneath Desdemona's bed.

Lifting the paper with egg-coated fingers, she scanned the date. It was already a month old. Surely Desdemona didn't need an old newspaper. She folded it and added it to the pile on the tray before wiping her hands on the wet apron, then carrying the tray to the kitchen.

She placed the tray on the table and picked up the plate to scrape the breakfast into the slop bucket. As she lifted it, her eyes caught on a bold box in the middle of the newspaper. She put the plate down and lifted the newspaper to read the words on the page. Brushing aside the bits of egg clinging to the paper, she snapped it once to release the coffee droplets.

Brides wanted in Colorado. Successful BUSINESSMEN seeking good-hearted women to move to Denver. Only serious matrimonial intent needs to respond. Send letter outlining situation to M. Chapman, **18 21st Street, Depot District.**

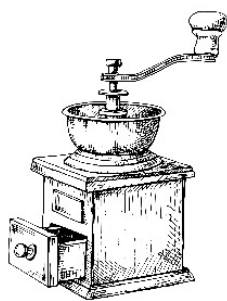
Her mouth fell open as she looked at the words. A mail-order bride!

That was it!

She could leave everything behind and go somewhere new. Somewhere that folks didn't know her. *Somewhere beyond her stepmother's influence.*

Victoria tore the paper and shoved it in her pocket. She would quickly write a letter and get it mailed when she went to town. She

would still need to get ready for the preacher's visit, but at least she now had a plan.



CHAPTER TWO



June 1875, Denver, Colorado

Josiah Altland measured the fabric in front. Marking it with a piece of chalk, he measured it once more, as he had been taught.

Measure twice, cut once.

Lately, though, even measuring twice had resulted in the fabric being shorter than the required length. As a result, he had a stack of materials that didn't quite measure up underneath the counter. Hopefully, he'd be able to use them in the future, but he hated waste.

Draping his measuring tape over his shoulders, he placed his elbows on the counter and took a deep breath. The sound of children

chattering in the corner filled his ears. He lifted his head to see two little girls sitting at a small table in the corner. Running his hand down his face, he leaned back and folded the fabric, adding it to the stack under the counter. He couldn't concentrate one iota. Thank goodness the store was quiet this morning.

What was his brother thinking?

Robert Altland was the father of two adorable girls—Winnifred and Jane. Unfortunately, he was now dead, and Josiah was tasked with taking care of them. He knew precisely what Robert was thinking. That it was time for Josiah to settle down and raise a family.

He wanted to do that... *at some point*. What he didn't want was to have a ready-made family thrust upon him. He was ill-equipped to take care of two little girls. He had never married, knew nothing about children, and had a shop to run.

Why hadn't Robert instructed his lawyer that Sarah's parents should raise the children? After Sarah's death, four years prior, Mr. and Mrs. Banks stepped up to help with their grandchildren. Josiah barely had a relationship with them, and most of all, he

hated change. Especially unexpected ones.

Robert had done an excellent job raising his daughters on his potato farm. The girls didn't want for anything... *except a mother*. After Robert died in a horrible accident, Josiah was the most astonished to learn he had been named guardian of Winnie and Jane. Not even Mr. and Mrs. Banks had looked surprised.

Was Josiah even up to the task?

He exhaled rather loudly and looked around his shop.

Altland's Haberdashery wasn't large, but he did a brisk business. Several larger stores had opened in Denver, but Josiah liked his small store. It was perfectly situated on the far side of Dry Creek Park, so it captured the attention of the businessmen walking by. Josiah prided himself on knowing the latest fashions for the men. He also delivered personal service, which provided him with a loyal clientele.

The store was bright and airy. He even splurged on glass windows for two sides of the building. He couldn't stand shopping in a dingy, poorly lit shop. Bolts of fabric lined one wall. Winnie helped him organize the fabric by color. It looked like a rainbow. The other walls were covered with racks and large

wooden cabinets, brass fixtures, and narrow drawers. They were filled with every kind of notion, thread, or buttons that would be needed to sew an outfit.

He even had a ribbon display for the ladies that visited. The center of the store was filled with pre-made clothes stacked on a large table and several tailor forms displaying the latest in jacket styles.

Josiah felt a tug on his arm, and he looked down to see his youngest niece with her fingers gripped onto the fabric of his shirt sleeve. Jane was looking at Josiah with large, hazel eyes. Reddish-brown curls covered her head and bounced as she rocked back and forth, looking at him.

“What is it, Jane?”

“Are you alright, Uncle Josiah?” Jane asked. Even at six years old, Jane didn’t miss much of anything. She was a sensitive child, adjusting to the world around her. She had yet to cry, since finding out her father had been killed. Josiah hoped she would be alright once the emotions bubbled up.

Winifred, or Winnie, had just turned seven. She was deep in concentration as she scribbled her school assignment. He could see her biting her bottom lip as she moved the soapstone

pencil across the slate. She looked so much like her father; it hurt Josiah's heart. Her hair was the color of a starless night. It was pulled back from her face with a large bow, revealing her dark eyes.

Why Mrs. Banks insisted on putting that ridiculous thing in Winnie's hair, he would never know. The bow was half the size of Winnie's tiny face, and Josiah was sure that if a good wind came through, it would catch the ribbon and lift the young girl away.

Josiah ruffled Jane's curly locks. "I'm alright, Jane. Are you done playing?"

Jane shook her head and leaned forward. "I have to go pee," she said in a loud whisper.

Josiah chuckled. Jane didn't like going to the privy alone. "Alright, we can take a break. Winnie," he called. Winnie lifted her head from her writing. "We are going to take a break. Jane needs to use the privy, and it is about lunchtime."

"I have to finish this one sentence," she said, peeking her tongue out from the side of her mouth. "I'm done," Winnie grinned, pushing her slate and pencil aside. She grabbed Jane's hand and tugged her towards the back door. "I'll take Jane outside," she called over her shoulder.

Josiah relished in the silence. The girls were well-behaved, but for someone who lived alone, they were very... *loud*. It had been nearly three weeks, and he still wasn't used to the noise or the company. Having someone around all the time was unnerving, to say the least. He was about to flip the sign in the window announcing the shop was closed when the door pushed open, and a woman carrying a young boy on her hip entered.

"I'm just getting ready to lock up," Josiah said, stepping back as the woman moved into the middle of the shop. Normally, he wouldn't close the shop during the day, but the town was very understanding. In fact, they rallied around him when the girls started coming with him in the morning.

"My apologies, Mr. Altland. I just needed to pick up a needle and some thread. Michael tore his pants, and we won't be home for a bit."

Josiah recognized the woman as Mrs. Gordon, the wife of a local Pinkerton agent. Mr. Gordon was highly regarded in the Denver community and had been friends with Robert. He recalled his brother saying that Mrs. Gordon was assisting him with something.

He couldn't imagine why his brother

needed the services of a married woman, but that was his brother's business. Robert never shared details of his life.

"Of course, Mrs. Gordon," Josiah said, closing and locking the door. He flipped the sign to closed. No point in allowing anyone else to enter. "Let me grab those items for you." He went to the notions area and opened several drawers, peering inside. "Do you want four or six needles?"

Mrs. Gordon gave a light laugh and moved the boy to her other hip. "I really only need one, but if four is the smallest package, I'll take four. And black thread, please."

Josiah removed one needle from the package and set the rest aside. He slid the needle underneath black thread wrapped around a wooden spool. The end of the needle was tucked inside so it wouldn't poke anyone.

"Anything else?"

"That's all. I have a business meeting in a few minutes, so I need to get Michael's pants fixed."

"Business? Are you a business owner, Mrs. Gordon?" Josiah was surprised. He fancied himself as modern as the next man, but women business owners were still frowned upon. He knew she didn't own a shop in town.

“Yes. I own my business.”

“I bet that is difficult while raising a son.”

“I don’t find it difficult at all. It is simply what you make it.”

“How does your husband feel about that?”

Mrs. Gordon blinked several times. “Archie?” She waved her hand in the air. “He knows where Michael is, and as long as his dinner is on the table by six o’clock then he has nothing to complain about.”

“What do you do?”

She placed her son on the ground as she rooted in her reticule for coins. “I find suitable matches for eligible men in the area. How much do I owe you?”

“Two cents. Don’t worry about the needle.” Josiah placed the spool on the counter. “A matchmaker, you say?” He raised his eyebrows and took the coins she offered.

Mrs. Gordon shrugged her shoulders. “I suppose you could call it that.”

“What else would you call it?”

“A helpmate placement agency. Are you in the market for a wife, Mr. Altland?”

“Absolutely not. I have a store to run, and now...” he let the words trail off.

“I’m terribly sorry about your brother.” She

looked around the shop. “Where are the girls now?”

“They are in the back.” He furrowed his brow. “You were helping him, weren’t you?”

“I can’t speak about my clients,” Mrs. Gordon said, her dark red curls bouncing underneath her bonnet.

“But you were finding him, someone. A bride?”

“Mr. Altland...”

Josiah put his hands in the air. “I won’t press you.”

She reached inside her reticule and pulled out a calling card. “If you need any help, don’t hesitate to contact me.”

Josiah looked at the script on the card.

Find your true love with Pinkerton Precision Mrs. Marianne Gordon 18 21 st Street, Depot District

“Pinkerton Precision? That’s rather unusual.”

“I worked for the Pinkertons.”

Josiah raised his eyebrow. “You worked for Archie Gordon?”

“He’s my husband, Mr. Altland.”

“Hmmm.” Josiah flipped the card in his fingers and held it towards her. “I’m not in the market for love, Mrs. Gordon.”

She ignored the offering. “I didn’t say anything about love. Sometimes you need to marry for practicality. If you are lucky, love comes later.”

“Well, I don’t have time for luck or love. Thank you for stopping by Mrs. Gordon.” He tucked the card in his pocket and walked to the front of the shop to hold the door open.

“Thank you, Mr. Altland. And remember, I’m only a few doors away.”

His eyes followed Mrs. Gordon and her son until they disappeared around the corner towards the park. He locked the door once more and lowered the blind before going to find Winnie and Jane.

He found them just outside the fenced area that contained multiple outhouses. Winnie was holding onto Jane’s hand as if she might disappear at any moment.

“Are you hungry?” he asked, walking up to them. Winnie slid her hand into Josiah’s larger one. He tried not to flinch. Not many people touched him, and he had never had a child just take his hand. Winnie swung her arm back

and forth as they moved down the street.

“I want pancakes,” Jane yelled over her sister. If Jane had her way, they would eat pancakes every day, three meals per day.

“You can’t have pancakes. Those are for breakfast,” Winnie chimed in.

“What do you want, Winnie?”

“I don’t know. Ice cream?”

Josiah laughed. “Pancakes and ice cream? That doesn’t sound like a particularly good lunch.”

“What do you want, Uncle Josiah?” Winnie asked.

“How about we go to Miss Pearl’s and see what she has today?” Miss Pearl’s Café was a popular spot for lunch and dessert.

Pearl Preston was an outstanding baker, and often there was a line out the door just to purchase one of her treats. Rumor had it she previously cooked for one of the large businesses in town, and after she married and had a baby, she opened a café and bakery.

Josiah knew that the girls would enjoy having lunch there, and it wouldn’t break his wallet.

As they crossed the park towards the road where the café was located, Josiah took the

opportunity to look around. It was the dead of summer, but Denver didn't get that hot. It was warm, but not too warm. There was a slight breeze whispering through the trees, and Josiah lifted his head to allow the wind to caress his cheeks.

"Hurry up, Uncle Josiah!" Jane called, running ahead. She stopped and picked a buttercup from the grass and put it to her nose. "It doesn't smell like anything," she complained, discarding the small flower.

Winnie ran to one of the rose bushes and stuck her head in the blossoms, their heady scent filling the park. "This smells nice," she said. "Come here, Jane."

Jane ran over to the roses and put her nose against the tender pink blossom. "Mmm... *pretty*." Grabbing Winnie's hand, they ran to the next bush.

Josiah spied Mrs. Gordon sitting on the bench. She was sewing her son's pants while he sat on her lap gumming a biscuit. He almost felt guilty that he shuffled her out the door. She lifted her head, and spying Josiah, she smiled in greeting. He nodded and continued walking.

It didn't take long to arrive at Miss Pearl's Café, and soon Josiah and the two girls were

tucked into a table at the back of the crowded room. It wasn't a large cafe, just about fifteen tables. The front contained glass shelves filled with loaves of bread, pies, and cakes for purchase. His eyes scanned the room.

Every table had two, three, or more guests, except for the table right next to him. He looked at the woman sitting alone and drinking her tea. There were circles under her eyes, as if she hadn't slept in days. Spying her valise next to the table, she probably hadn't.

Denver had a large train station, so she probably wasn't well-rested if she had been traveling. She wore a crushed green velvet dress, almost like a riding habit. Josiah gave a delicate snort. He could tell the dress was several years old and hadn't been stored properly. The shoulders were bare in several places, probably from moths.

She couldn't have been more than eighteen, and there was an innocence about her that touched him. He watched as she lifted a cup of tea and glanced his way. Her hair was dark, like Winnie's, but she had a touch of gold in it. Her hazel eyes were framed by long dark lashes, and there was a pink tinge to her cheeks.

"Are you ready to order?" a soft voice

interrupted his thoughts.

Josiah turned his attention from the young woman to the woman waiting with a paper in her hand. "My apologies. What do you recommend?"

"You can't go wrong with Pearl's pimento cheese sandwiches. The soup of the day is barley and bean. Dinner is boiled ham, beans, and potatoes."

"That sounds fine," Josiah said. "I'll do the sandwich and soup. Do you want soup, Winnie?" Winnie nodded her head. She never argued or questioned anything. "What about you, Jane?"

"I want pancakes," Jane insisted.

"You can't have pancakes right now, honey," Josiah responded. "Pick something else. How about a cheese sandwich?"

Jane folded her arms in front of her. "No. I want a pancake."

Josiah looked at the server with embarrassment. "I am sorry. Just bring her a cheese sandwich."

"How old are you, child?" the server asked.

"Six," Jane said, holding up her fingers.

"I have a six-year-old daughter at home. She likes pancakes too. Let me see what I can

do.” She looked at Josiah once more. “Coffee and milk?”

Josiah nodded, and the woman tucked the notepad in her pocket before heading towards the back of the restaurant.

“I am so sorry I’m late,” a voice said, causing Josiah to look around. Mrs. Gordon was sliding into a seat across from the woman in the damaged riding habit. She hadn’t noticed Josiah or the girls at the table, and her son was missing. He wondered where the child was.

“Tea, Marianne?” Pearl, the café owner, asked. He appreciated that he recognized her. There were an awful lot of new people today.

“Yes, please.” Marianne shrugged out of her wrap and let it fall over the edge of her seat. Josiah turned his eyes back to his table and watched the girls. He didn’t want to be caught eavesdropping on the conversation, but the next words left no doubt that he had been listening.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Mrs. Gordon reach out and pat the woman’s hand. “How was your trip, my dear?”

The woman put her cup down. “It was long. The situation arose right before I left. I’m glad to be here now.”

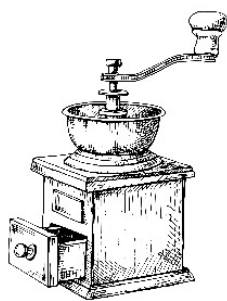
“About that,” Mrs. Gordon said. She took a deep breath. “There is no easy way to say this.”

“Then just say it. You don’t need to stand on ceremony for me.”

“You can’t marry Mr. Altland.” Josiah’s ears perked up at the mention of his brother. He didn’t even try to hide that he was listening. Mrs. Gordon picked up the woman’s hand. “He was killed three weeks ago in a horrible accident. There wasn’t time to get word to you.”

He felt his body jerk and wondered how long it would be before the mention of Robert dying didn’t make him flinch. He had appreciated it when the townspeople stopped mentioning it every time, they saw him but there were still moments, like now where the shock of it all hit him again.

Josiah desperately wanted to see the girl’s face. He couldn’t help but wonder what her response would be. Instead, he reached out, straightening all the silverware on the table. Life was always better when things were tidied up and accounted for.



CHAPTER THREE



“What do you mean he’s dead?” Victoria’s voice squeaked as the words spilled from her lips. She looked across the table at the red-haired woman, calmly sipping her tea.

Mrs. Gordon was several years older than Victoria and had a head full of striking red curls. Not quite the color of fire, instead the color of cinnamon Victoria used in her holiday baking.

How could she be so calm, especially after delivering such devastating news? Victoria wondered.

Her eyes darted around the crowded café. Every single table had someone either eating or sipping coffee. She glanced at the table next

to the one where she and Mrs. Gordon were sitting. A man, looking extremely out of place, sat there with two young girls. Victoria noticed him shifting in his seat as he tried to look anywhere but at her table.

Victoria tried to ignore the words Mrs. Gordon was speaking and instead focused on an object until she could gather her thoughts together. As such, she focused on the man before her, looking more through him than at him.

She would have found him handsome if she had seen him on the street. His hair was dark and clipped close to his head. There was a mark from his hatband, where it had flattened his hair, and the top stood up slightly where he had run his fingers through it.

Had he heard what Mrs. Gordon just said?

As if reading her thoughts, he looked up and stared at her intently with bottomless brown eyes. Embarrassment stained her cheeks, and she pressed her hand against the warm skin. Her embarrassment was short-lived as the server blocked her view, placing plates in front of the man and his children.

Two beautiful little dark-haired girls. Just like the children Robert Altland described in his letters. She was excited about the prospect

of being a mother, and she vowed never... ever... to treat her stepchildren the way Desdemona treated her.

Never.

Now she didn't have that chance. Mr. Altland was dead. She raised her eyes back to Mrs. Gordon.

"There was an accident at his farm." Her eyes were sympathetic as she spoke to Victoria. "I am so sorry."

"What am I going to do, Mrs. Gordon?" Victoria's voice was like a whisper. "I left everything behind. I can't go back home." She shivered at the thought of having to face Desdemona and Byron. She could only imagine the looks on their faces when they realized no one was there to fetch their coffee or deliver breakfast to their rooms. She wouldn't be surprised if Desdemona hired someone to find her and drag her home. She was nineteen now, but unless she was married, Desdemona was still responsible for her.

"Call me Marianne. And don't worry. We can find you someone." Marianne leaned down and grabbed a stack of papers from the leather satchel next to her feet. "There are plenty of available men just looking for a wife." Victoria watched her thumb through

the papers and pulled several sheets out, placing them on the table. She picked the first paper up and scanned it. "Here. Mr. Woodhall is seeking a wife. Oh. Never mind that," she said, laying the paper aside.

"What?" Victoria asked. She couldn't be picky, or else she might have to head back home. "What's wrong with that one?"

"Mr. Woodhall is much older, my dear. Like much older. He has eight children and lives with his mother. Delightful woman, but very interfering. You do not want to play nursemaid to all those children." Marianne picked up the next piece of paper.

"The children. What happened to the children?"

"Excuse me?" Marianne returned the paper to the table.

"Mr. Altland had children. What happened to those children?"

Mrs. Gordon blinked several times before pushing her cinnamon-colored curls from her face. "They are with a relative."

Victoria breathed a sigh of relief. "So, they aren't being abandoned to the orphanage or workhouse." She wouldn't be able to sleep thinking about those poor young dears losing their father and then being sent away.

Marianne shook her head, her curls bobbing around her face. "Oh heavens no."

"Thank goodness." Victoria picked up her teacup with shaking hands and brought it to her lips. Taking a sip, she hoped the weak brew would calm her nerves. The entire trip to Denver, she daydreamed about meeting Robert and his two little girls. Even though they had never corresponded, the letter that Marianne included in the package inviting Victoria out to Denver made her dream of a real family. She carefully hid the letter and ticket in her floorboard, only taking it out to read when she knew everyone was sound asleep.

Desdemona was still insistent that she marry Byron. Victoria tried to postpone, wanting to talk to her father's lawyer, but he was out of town. Finally, Desdemona couldn't be stalled any longer. She set a date two days before Victoria's nineteenth birthday.

The day before she was to marry Byron, she fled in the middle of the night. Taking her carpetbag, her day dress, a few items that belonged to her father, and her money sewn carefully inside the lining of her riding skirt, she walked to town and boarded the first train heading west. That was nearly a week ago.

She was fearful that Desdemona might send someone after her, but who would they send? They didn't know where she was going, and she never gave any indication that she would be leaving.

"Mr. Thomas Salamander..."

Victoria giggled. "Really? That's a mouthful."

"I'll have you know that Mr. Salamander is a respected member of this community."

"What does he do?"

"He's an undertaker."

Victoria nearly spat out her tea. "Oh my. I don't think so." Since she knew most wives worked in their husband's businesses, the thought of being around deceased bodies was too much for her to bear. "Who is next?"

"Mr. Weston is seeking a companion."

"A companion? Not a wife?"

"No. He wants a wife, but the person would also be a companion for his elderly mother."

Victoria sat back in the chair. From the ads she read in the paper, most men wanted a maid and someone to warm their bed. If that was her destiny, then she would have stayed at home.

Is this why she came all the way out to Denver?

Emotions swirled through her brain. *Was home as bad as she thought? Maybe she was too sensitive.* Victoria may have lost her father, but Desdemona lost her husband. That was bound to affect a person.

Perhaps she was over-analyzing.

She felt hot. Tugging on her collar with two fingers, her other hand shook as she reached for the glass of water.

She noticed the handsome man looking at her once more.

Glancing around the café, she wondered if everyone was staring at her.

Did they know what she was doing?

Why did she ever think this was a good idea?

It felt as though a thousand needles were piercing her skin.

“Miss Rossi?” Mrs. Gordon said. Victoria shook her head.

“I am so sorry. I think I made a mistake.” Victoria attempted to push back from the table. She stood, but quickly fell back in the seat as a wave of nausea passed over her.

“A mistake?” It sounded as if Mrs. Gordon

was imbibing. Her words were slurring, and she appeared to go in and out of focus. “Miss Rossi?”

“I-uh...” From the corner of her eye, Victoria saw the man stand. She tried to say something, but her eyes started to roll in her head, and suddenly everything went black.



Josiah put his spoon back in his soup bowl, the clinking noise caused Winnie to lift her eyes from where she was shoveling soup in her mouth. Even though the children had never missed a meal, anyone looking at them might think they were starving.

Winnie raised her eyebrow and shook her head. “Poppa said it is rude for your spoon or fork to bang against your plate.”

“Rude–rude–rude,” Jane repeated, as if singing a song.

“Jane, shush,” Josiah admonished. Jane squinted her eyes and stabbed a piece of the pancake before shoving it in her mouth. Josiah ran his hand down over his face. These children were going to be the death of him. Not that he didn’t love them, he just didn’t know how to relate to these two little girls.

He gave a sigh and looked around the diner, his eyes resting once more on the young

woman sitting with Mrs. Gordon. There was something about her that commanded his attention. He couldn't put his finger on it.

He heard her give a nervous giggle and then push back from the table. She looked like she was going to faint. The color had drained from her face, and she lifted her fingers to her lips as an invisible force knocked her back in the chair.

He heard Mrs. Gordon call to her. *Miss Rossi.*

Miss Rossi didn't respond, and Josiah saw her head tilt back. Pushing away from the table with such force, his soup sloshed over the side of the bowl, and the chair fell backward. He saw several heads turn in their direction from the loud noise.

He was by her side just as her eyes started rolling back and she collapsed in his arms.

"Oh, my goodness," Mrs. Gordon said, rushing from around the table. "Pearl! Get the doctor."

"No time. We'll need to take her over there right away," Josiah said. "Winnifred, stay here and watch your sister for a few minutes. I'll be right back."

"Uncle Josiah?" Winnie called, worry evident in her voice.

“Don’t worry,” Pearl said, waving towards him. “They are fine here. I’ll feed them dessert. You better go too, Marianne. You can pick up Michael later.”

Josiah lifted the woman into his arms. Her legs swung over one arm as he cupped her back with his other. Her head rolled to the side, causing her hair to tumble from the confines of the pins. He lifted his leg to adjust his hold on the woman and shifted her so that her head rested against his chest.

Josiah had never been this close to a woman before. Of course, he found women attractive, but he kept his distance. He thought marriage was a sacred bond, and his parents had pressed the importance of waiting until marriage. At twenty-five years old, he’d never found anyone that he would want to spend the rest of his life with.

Now he had a stranger in his arms.

Calm down, Josiah, he chastised himself. *She just needs help.*

He pulled the woman closer to him and headed from the café towards the doctor’s office several doors down.

As his thumb rubbed the fabric of her threadbare jacket, he felt the sharpness from her bones under his fingers. Anger rolled off

him as he realized the woman had been starved! Her clothes were clean, albeit worn, and her hair tickled his nose.

The scent of roses filled his nostrils, and he wanted to bury his head in her curls as he held her. It reminded him of the flowers in the park.

Up close, he could see the bruising on her skin. The powder she wore did little to hide the bruises. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, indicating she hadn't rested in quite a while. *Starved and without rest.* Josiah wondered if she had run away from one of the factories. He heard those factory owners were not known for their geniality.

Mrs. Gordon scurried ahead of him and opened the door to Dr. Parker's office. The scent of pine oil was prevalent in the air as Josiah followed her into the small office.

"Dr. Parker?" Mrs. Gordon called. "Are you here? Dr. Parker?" Her voice echoed in the empty office.

The office was clean and bright. A few chairs sat near a large picture window, and two doors led to examination rooms. Josiah leaned down the hallway. He could see a large desk covered with papers, but no Dr. Parker.

"Dr. Parker?" he shouted.

Most proprietors lived above their shops. Maybe the doctor was upstairs? If he wasn't home, then the front door should have been locked. Josiah held his breath, listening for any sound.

Heavy footsteps could be heard from the level above the office. Josiah breathed a sigh of relief. At least someone was available. A minute later, the elderly man appeared from behind a wall. He saw Josiah holding the woman in his arms and Dr. Parker's eyebrows raised in surprise.

"What do we have here?" he asked.

"She fainted," Josiah asked. *Wasn't it obvious?*

Mrs. Gordon ran forward. "I think she was overwhelmed. She had just received some rather distressing news."

"Bring her this way, young man," Dr. Parker said.

Josiah walked into the first room and gently placed Miss Rossi on the table. He thought he saw her eyelashes flutter, but she didn't open her eyes. "Will she be alright?"

"I've not looked at her yet. Why don't you go out and wait with Mrs. Gordon?"

The need to protect this woman raced through him. Who would abuse such a young

woman? He might not be able to relate to his nieces, but he would never harm them. He opened his mouth, but then decided against saying anything. Nodding, he backed out of the room.

“The doctor will take good care of her,” Mrs. Gordon said, moving to sit in one of the chairs. “I’ll wait here. You can get back to the café and your girls.”

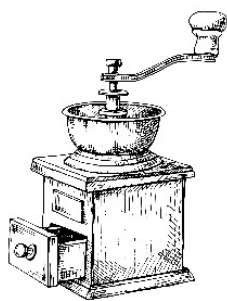
“I’ll wait. I know Pearl will watch them.” He traveled the room in a circle. Nervous energy radiating through him. “Do you often take your son there?”

Mrs. Gordon nodded. “Pearl and I worked together at the Pinkerton office here in town. She helps me when I need it.”

“Hmmm.”

“What? You are looking at me as if I’ve grown a second head on my shoulders.”

Josiah narrowed his eyes as he looked at Mrs. Gordon. “Would you care to inform me why this woman thought she was coming out here to marry Robert?”



CHAPTER FOUR



“I told you, Mr. Altland...”

Josiah held up his hand. “I know what you told me, Mrs. Gordon, but we are beyond that, don’t you think?”

He watched as Mrs. Gordon wrung her hands. “I suppose it doesn’t matter,” she glanced his way, “since Robert can no longer fulfil his obligation.”

“What obligation was that?”

“Robert decided that it was time to find a mother for the girls.”

“They have a mother. She’s dead too.”

“I know. But those little girls need a woman in their lives. Someone who can put bows in their hair, tell them stories, teach

them all the things those young ladies should know. Someone who will raise them up right, so they will never depart from it.”

“Did you have such a mother, Mrs. Gordon?”

Mrs. Gordon stood and walked over to the window and watched the people passing by. “I did. I had the best mother. I may not have appreciated her growing up, and I left the moment I had a chance, but she was genuine. The lessons she taught me still resonate in my being.”

“What did she teach you?” Josiah was genuinely interested.

Mrs. Gordon stood at the window a moment longer before turning towards Josiah. She ran her hands down the front of her skirt, grabbing the fabric before releasing it and clasping her hands together. “Marmee, which is what we call my mother, instilled a good sense of right and wrong in us. She taught us to help those who can’t help themselves. I guess you could say my family is a bunch of rescuers.”

“I remember Robert brought home a baby bunny with a broken leg.” Josiah’s voice went very soft. “He tried to wrap the leg up with strips from a pillowcase. My mother wasn’t

happy to find out her best linens were used to try to save a rabbit.” He gave a little chuckle.

“Did the bunny’s leg heal?”

Josiah shook his head. “No. It wasn’t meant to be in captivity. Robert buried it under the rose bushes.” He sat up tall in the chair. “It wasn’t the first animal that my brother brought home. Some flourished under his care and were able to be released. There was this squirrel that fell from a tree. Tiny little thing. Robert carried it around in his pocket for a week before Ma found it. He called it Squeakers. That squirrel lived in the house for ten years. I’m surprised Pa didn’t put it in the stew pot.”

Marianne giggled. “That would explain it then.”

“Explain what?”

“Why Robert picked Victoria.”

“I don’t understand.”

Mrs. Gordon sat down in the chair and crossed her hands on her lap. “Miss Rossi’s father died. From what I understand, her father was a well-respected businessman. I’m not sure, but after his death his wife, Victoria’s stepmother, became very abusive. She wanted to escape that situation. Perhaps Robert thought he was rescuing her?”

“How old is she? She doesn’t look a day over seventeen.”

“She just turned nineteen. She’s of age to be married.” Mrs. Gordon raised her hands in the air. “It was rather sudden. Once I contacted her on Robert’s behalf, I received a letter that she was leaving immediately and would arrive this morning. It was just over a month ago that I contacted her. Thank goodness I got the letter in time.”

“Where is she staying?”

“Well. She was to marry Robert today, but that isn’t happening now. I’ll take her to Mrs. Hawthorne’s boarding house until I can figure out what to do with her.” Mrs. Gordon turned to look at Josiah and raised one eyebrow. “Unless....”

Josiah had been sitting with his hands steepled at his lips. As soon as he saw Mrs. Gordon lift her eyebrow, he leaned back in the chair and lifted his hands. “I told you. I’m not in the market for a wife.”

“But you do need someone to take care of those girls. It makes perfect sense.” Marianne clapped her hands excitedly.

Before Josiah could respond, the door opened, and Dr. Parker came out.

“Is she alright?” Josiah asked.

“She’s as well as can be expected. She fainted from hunger. I’d say she hasn’t had a proper meal in a while.” The doctor headed up the stairs leading to his living quarters.

“Where are you going?” Josiah asked.

Dr. Parker turned. “Why, to make her a sandwich,” he said before running up the rest of the steps.

Josiah waited until the sound of the doctor’s footsteps disappeared into the apartment before turning back to Mrs. Gordon. “She’s starving.”

“I – I didn’t know.”

“There isn’t enough room at my apartment. I can barely handle the girls being there.” Josiah lived above the mercantile. He had a one-bedroom apartment, with a small study that had been taken over by Winnie and Jane. There was no way one more person could live comfortably in such a small space.

“What about Robert’s house?”

“The farm?”

Marianne nodded. “The house should be big enough. Plenty of places for the children to play. You could have a garden, maybe a few chickens.”

“I’m not a farmer, Mrs. Gordon. I said

goodbye to that life as soon as I could.”

“You don’t have to be. Put Miss Rossi, Mrs. Altland, if you have her, there with the children. Why, you don’t even have to visit.” She brushed her hands in dismissal. “Both of your problems would be solved.”

Josiah rubbed his hand down his face. “I don’t know...”

The doctor raced down the steps with a plate and disappeared back into the room.

“She needs someone. You need someone. Those girls need a mother.” Mrs. Gordon jabbed her finger in the air at him, with each word. “You should think about it.”

Josiah’s eyes drifted to the closed door. He could hear voices speaking softly. Victoria. She looked like a Victoria. Regal despite her frayed clothes. He would think about it.



“What happened?” Victoria sat upright on the table and dangled her legs over the side.

The last thing she remembered was sitting in the café talking to Mrs. Gordon. Now it appeared she was in a surgical office. A man she didn’t recognize looked at her from behind wire frames. Was he a doctor?

“You fainted. Mrs. Gordon and Mr. Altland

brought you here. I'm Doc Parker."

"Mr. Altland?" *But he was dead!*

Victoria raised her hands to her head, closing her eyes while she rubbed her temples. She had a throbbing headache.

"Here," Doc Parker said. Victoria opened her eyes to see a glass of water being waved in front of her face. "Drink this."

"I wonder why I fainted," she said, reaching for the glass.

"Have you been under duress lately?"

Victoria sipped the cool water so she wouldn't have to answer. When she was done, she handed the glass back to the doctor and nodded. "I traveled here from New Jersey. I guess the trip wore me out more than I thought it would."

"Any chance you might be in the family way?"

"Not a chance," Victoria scoffed.

The doctor put the empty glass on a table. "I just had to ask."

Victoria raised her shoulders. "Well, thank you. I'm all better now. I should go find Mrs. Gordon, so she doesn't worry." She slid from the table.

"Not so fast." Doc Parker placed his hands

on her shoulder and gently guided her back to the table. "I want to do a quick exam."

Victoria raised her eyebrow. "Why? I'm fine."

"Maybe. But you aren't until I say you are."

"*Harrumph.*" Victoria lifted herself back up on the table. The doctor pulled out a stethoscope and listened to her heart. "Is it still working?"

"Ticking like a clock," he laughed. "When was the last time you ate?"

"That's an odd question," Victoria said, adjusting her blouse. The doctor raised his eyebrow, and Victoria squirmed under the intense glare. "Alright. It was yesterday. But it was only because I was traveling. I arrived in Denver just a bit ago. I've not had a chance to get something to eat yet," she quickly added.

"Hmmm. It looks like you've missed more than a few meals." He stood and walked to the door. "I'll be right back."

He closed the door behind him, and Victoria heard the whisper of voices come through the door. A few moments later, the doctor reappeared, this time with a plate containing a thick slice of ham between two pieces of bread. "Eat this," he commanded as he handed her the plate.

Victoria hesitantly took a bite. As soon as the ham and cheese hit the back of her throat, the rest of the sandwich was gone in six bites. "Thank you," she said, placing the plate on the table.

"Do you feel better now?" Doc Parker moved to the side, and Victoria could see that he had left the door open.

"I do."

"Good. Good. Then it is probably nothing serious." The doctor helped her from the table. "If you haven't had anything to eat for a bit, that can cause it. I recommend you have a large dinner tonight and rest from your trip."

"That's all?"

Doc Parker nodded. "That's all. Now, I know your friends are concerned about you."

Victoria peered around the doctor's shoulder. She watched Marianne's head pop around the corner.

"Are you alright, dear?" Marianne asked. Her brow was furrowed, and Victoria noticed Marianne biting her bottom lip. "You gave us quite a scare."

Victoria wasn't used to having anyone worry about her. She worried her hands before wiping them on her skirt. "It wasn't my intention. It appears that I just forgot to eat."

Marianne looked as though she didn't believe her. Her lips pursed to the side of her mouth. "Alright. We should go back to Pearl's and get you something proper."

"But Doc Parker—"

"I insist," Marianne said, taking Victoria's arm. "We didn't even finish our tea."

Victoria allowed Marianne to lead her into the reception area. She was surprised to see the man from the café sitting on one of the chairs. "You," she cried. "What are you doing here?"

The man stood and walked over. "I needed to make sure you were alright and didn't need anything."

Marianne pointed at the man. "Mr. Altland is the one that carried you here to the doctor."

Victoria lifted her hand to her cheek. *Mr. Altland?* She recalled the doctor saying something about a Mr. Altland carrying her to his office. "I thought Mr. Altland was killed."

"That was my brother, Robert. I'm Josiah Altland."

"Josiah." Victoria allowed the word to roll on her tongue. "That's a strong name. It means the Lord supports you," she said.

"You know your Bible," he responded.

Victoria nodded. "Thank you for coming to my aid."

"My pleasure. What are you going to do now?"

Shame flooded Victoria's cheeks. "I don't know. I have a bit of money, but only enough for a few days."

"We will get you settled at the boarding house, Victoria," Marianne said. "Let's head back to the café first. We need to check on the children, and I left my papers there. Your bags are there, too."

"Oh, my! I hope they are still there."

"I'm sure they are fine. Miss Pearl runs a very honest establishment. She probably tucked them in a corner so they wouldn't be disturbed. I do need to get back to my nieces, though. May I escort you, Miss Rossi?" Josiah held out his elbow and tilted his head. Victoria nodded and slipped her hand through his arm as they left the doctor's office and headed down the street. She looked over her shoulder and noticed Marianne was discretely falling back so that Victoria and Josiah could talk. "Do you like Denver, Miss Rossi?"

Victoria turned her head back to Josiah. He was even more handsome now that she was so close to him. She thought his eyes were dark,

but she could see they were light brown with flecks of green. A woman could get lost in those eyes.

"I've not seen much of it. Just from the depot to the café. I only arrived this morning."

"Denver is a lovely city. Hopefully, you'll be around long enough to enjoy it."

Victoria bit her bottom lip. "I don't know. I'll need to make new plans since Mr. Altland... your brother is dead."

"Mrs. Gordon was telling me of your plight."

"Yes. I intended to come out and marry Robert."

"Were you corresponding with him?"

Victoria shook her head. "Only the letter Mrs. Gordon had him write. I did respond, but I don't know if he received it. I'm going to think he did, since she sent me the ticket." She placed her hand on his arm and gave a slight squeeze. "I am sorry for your loss. I can't imagine what his two little girls are going through."

"I don't think they are grieving yet. It was such a shock."

"May I ask how it happened?"

"My brother fancies himself a farmer. He

owns a worthless piece of land outside of town. He saw something there I never could. He was plowing a new field when he was bitten by a snake.”

“How terrible.”

“It was Winnie who found him. He didn’t come home for supper. Thank goodness she didn’t run into any snakes. They were alone for two days. I shudder to think about it.”

“How terrible! I can’t even imagine the distress that poor child was in.”

“It took two days for me to find them. The only reason I went to the house was Robert didn’t stop by the store to pick up the new rifle he ordered. The girls came home with me that very night.”

Victoria patted Josiah’s arm. “The girls are fortunate to have an uncle like you.”

Josiah shrugged. “I don’t know anything about children, and certainly not about little girls.” He stopped in the middle of the street and turned to look at Victoria. “I need help. Those girls need a mother. You don’t want to go home for some reason. Maybe we can help each other out?”

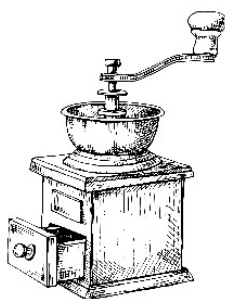
“I don’t know anything about being a governess.”

“I’m not asking you to be a governess, Miss

Rossi. I'm asking you to be their mother."

"Mother? You can't just give those children away."

"I have no intention of those girls going anywhere. You came here to marry Robert. It would only make sense that you marry me, now."



CHAPTER FIVE



“You? Marry you?” Victoria couldn’t believe what she just heard. “Do you even want to get married?”

Josiah shook his head. “Honestly, no.” Victoria took a step back. “But I want to do what’s right by those girls. They deserve a family.”

“I can agree on that.” She looked around, but Marianne was nowhere to be found. It was as if the matchmaker had disappeared completely. “It just seems rather awkward to come out here expecting to marry one man and then marry his brother instead. Don’t you find that odd?”

“I guess it could seem that way.” Josiah

started walking back towards the café. “However, I trust Robert, and I know Mrs. Gordon is an honest, upstanding woman. If you were good enough for my brother, then it is reasonable to infer that you are good enough for me.” Victoria wasn’t sure how to respond. “How about you have supper with us? You can ask me or the girls any questions you like. Tonight, you’ll be at the boarding house, so you don’t have to make any rash decisions.”

Victoria wanted to laugh. *As if running away to the west wasn’t a rash decision.* She knew she would never go back home, and she wanted a safe place to stay. That was what he was offering her. She was slightly disappointed that Josiah wanted to get married just so she could take care of the children. She ran her hands down the front of her riding habit, her fingers crushing the velvet.

“I’d like that. Thank you.”

When they arrived at the café, Victoria was surprised to see the room was nearly empty. Her luggage was in the corner, just as Josiah predicted. When he placed his hand on the small of her back, she was sure that her heart would beat out of her chest. No one had ever

touched her so intimately before. She was surprised at the heat radiating from beneath his leather glove.

“Marianne already stopped by,” Pearl said as they passed the counter she was wiping down. “She had to get home to fix Mr. Gordon’s supper.”

“Were the girls any trouble?” Josiah asked.

“Not at all. They are still at the table having a snack and milk right now.”

“Be sure to let me know what I owe you.”

Pearl waved them away with her rag. “Marianne paid for lunch, and you don’t owe me anything for the treats. The girls are delightful. You should bring them back more often.”

Josiah smiled. “I will.” He led Victoria to the table in the back, where the girls were eating jam tarts. “What do we have here?”

“Uncle Josiah,” Jane said, dropping from the chair to wrap her sticky hands around his pant leg. “Winnie was worried you weren’t coming back.”

Josiah patted the child on the back. “I promised I’d be back, and I brought a friend.” He waved Victoria forward. “This is Miss Rossi. These are my nieces, Winnifred and Jane.”

Winnie tilted her head. "You are the lady that fell down."

"I am. I simply fainted."

"Are you better?" Jane asked.

Victoria nodded. "I am. I just needed to eat something."

"I had pancakes," Jane said. "Do you like pancakes?"

Victoria laughed. "I do."

"Maybe Miss Pearl can make you one," Jane offered.

"We'll see." Victoria sat at the table and adjusted her skirt around her legs. Her eyes followed Josiah as he went to the front to speak to the woman at the counter. He was a handsome man, indeed. Perhaps she would just marry him if it meant she could look at him anytime she wanted. She felt a tug on her sleeve and glanced down to see Jane offering a sticky tart with a crumbling crust.

"Would you like a bite?"

Victoria smiled at the little girl. "Thank you, sweetheart but you go ahead and finish it."

Jane's small head bobbed and seconds later the tasty treat had completely disappeared. Glancing up Victoria noticed Josiah watching

them with what appeared to be interest in his gaze.

Don't be silly, Victoria silently admonished herself. She could not imagine that he found her attractive or anything like that as she looked down at her threadbare dress.

“What would you like to eat?” a waitress asked, appearing at her side.

“I...” Victoria wasn't sure what to do, she barely had enough left for the boarding house and she hadn't planned on having any personal expenses once she arrived in Colorado.

“We'll have two pimento cheese sandwiches, thank you.” Josiah spoke firmly, ordering for both, before reaching out to grab Winnie's suddenly tipping glass.

“I'll bring those right out for you,” she said and then pivoted, heading back to the kitchen and returning a moment later.

Victoria knew that she was hungry. It had been more than a few days since she'd eaten and the sandwich that the doctor had given her only seemed to wake the starving beast inside of her. The sandwich disappeared so quickly that Josiah chuckled.

“I've never seen anyone with such an appetite and that's counting Jane and her love

of pancakes.” He grinned at her.

Victoria’s face fell, not being able to decide if it was from being called out or the fact that he’d noticed. Things at home, with Desdemona, meant she had always had to eat quickly or hide her findings. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be allowed to eat.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” Josiah said, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “I was just thinking that most women I’ve seen eat, tend to pick at things like little birds.”

“It has been a while since I’ve eaten, minus the sandwich the doctor put together.” Turning she eyed the little girls.

“I like your bow,” she grinned at Winnie, whose cheeks pinkened up.

“Thank you, my grandmother gave it to me.”

“And you have some jam on your face, come here.” Victoria reached a hand out to Jane as she used the other to dip the napkin into her water before wiping the girl’s face.

“Let me see if Pearl can have one of the staff watch the girls for a few minutes and I’ll help you get your luggage to the boarding house.” Josiah nodded to himself as if he had already decided before standing to search for the diner’s matron.

“He is being silly,” Winnie whispered loudly to her sister when he had left the table.

“I told you he was watching her,” Jane grinned proudly.

“Her who?” Victoria couldn’t stop herself as she leaned in conspiratorially to the girls.

“Well, you of course.” Jane poked her nose with a single finger.

“Uncle Josiah doesn’t talk to ladies, unless they’re in the store,” Winnie said. “Here he comes.”

“Hm, he seems friendly though,” Victoria couldn’t help but push to see what the girls thought. Even at their ages she had always been good at reading people, it was the escaping part that she had struggled with.

“Oh he’s very nice, but we’ve never seen him with a lady and Papa used to say that he wouldn’t know what to do with one if she bit him on the nose.” Winnie sucked her bottom lip between her teeth, “I miss Papa, and the farm.”

Victoria reached out gently, rubbing a hand on the child’s back, her gaze resting on Josiah as he looked back at her.

He wasn’t hard on the eyes and though awkward, he appeared to care deeply about his nieces, and they were clearly attached to

him. But would she be exchanging one prison for another if there wasn't any affection between them?

"Girls, Mrs. Watson is going to take you to the park to play with her daughter, who loves pancakes as well, while I walk Miss Victoria to the boarding house."

Victoria hadn't noticed the other woman or little girl standing beside him. She gave a smile to the woman and waved to the little girl.

"She comes in the store all the time," Winnie whispered in Victoria's ear. "She's a widow."

Shaking her head slightly to focus, Victoria smiled at Mrs. Watson. "I'm sure I could find it myself if it's too much trouble."

"No trouble at all. Mrs. Gordon had to go home for dinner, and she had asked if I would take you to the boarding house, but if Mr. Altland will take your luggage then I'll be happy to keep the girls." Mrs. Watson's attention shifted to them, "Why don't you three go use the privy before we go?"

All three girls fled towards the back of the diner, but Jane stopped suddenly and returned to Victoria's side.

"No more falling down. We can't have a

mother who is just going to fall down all the time.” She pivoted quickly and raced back to the others before they slipped outside.

“I...”

“She is a very intuitive little girl,” Josiah said as color flooded into his cheeks.

“But she can’t possibly know that I am meant to be their mother,” Victoria stammered glancing between Mrs. Watson and Josiah.

“Sometimes girls just know things. If you need anything while you’re here, I’m here at lunchtime each day. Call me Amabel.” Amabel patted Victoria’s arm lightly as she followed the girls out the back of the diner.

Josiah didn’t waste any time as he picked up Victoria’s satchel and valise. She hadn’t packed much after all, only what she could carry.

“I can carry those,” she spoke, surprised at the timidity in her voice.

“I’m sure that you can, but I’ve got it. We’ll go out the front and then to the left. The boarding house isn’t far.” Josiah gestured with his hand and easily fell in step behind her. “I was thinking about what you said, about stepping in for your brother. But I don’t want to cause any trouble; it’s already a new town, and new people for me. Angry women are not

something I want or need following me while I'm here." Victoria twisted her hands as she peered at him sideways.

"I am not committed to anyone; therefore, I doubt you would find an angry woman on my behalf. Those girls need a mother, a caregiver. I have a store to run and very little knowledge about little girls, apart from how different they are but I did learn to install a hair bow." He spoke evenly and she found herself wondering if there wasn't a hint of exasperation in his tone.

"But what if you're not happy, with me or the girls... marriage is forever, after all." She couldn't believe she was even considering this, but an image of Byron drifted through her mind and she knew then that she would agree if only not to have to go back there.

"I think it could be a good match. You'd be able to take care of the house and the children. I can run the shop while you're at home cooking and cleaning." He pressed on, while she felt a shudder run over her.

"I won't be a nanny or a scullery maid." Her voice raised on the last word.

Josiah looked at her, a look passed over his face, but it was gone in an instant. "Of course not. I would never expect that. Perhaps we

could agree to try it for a few months and as long as we don't...," he cleared his throat, "don't consummate the marriage, it can always be annulled, and your reputation will still be intact as well."

He paused, setting her bags at his feet, and Victoria realized they had arrived at the small boarding house.

"I have a meeting with Marianne in the morning and if it's alright with you, I would like to think over your offer and pray about it." She reached down for her bag, fingertips brushing against his pant leg as she did so.

"Do you need to send word to your family that you have arrived safely?" he asked suddenly.

"No, my father passed away last year, so it's just me. There is no one left for me to send a letter."

They both paused for a moment, remembering those that had passed on.

"What about your sister?"

"No. She doesn't want anything to do with me. It is best left alone."

"If you need anything, we are just above the haberdashery. Why don't you come by tomorrow after you talk to Mrs. Gordon?" Josiah said, not sure why he was lingering.

“Thank you, you’ve been very kind. And thank you for your help with the fainting thing. I’m so very embarrassed.” Victoria leaned down to pick up her bags. She would rest tonight and come up with a new plan.

Josiah opened the gate for her and watched as she slowly walked up the stairs, the door opening just before she reached the top. He wondered how long the mistress of the boarding house had been watching them through the windows. He hadn’t even noticed her.

Once Victoria was in the building, he returned to the park to find Winnie, Jane and Mrs. Watson’s daughter playing a hopping game along the pathway.

“Were they any trouble?” he asked, settling beside Mrs. Watson on the bench watching them.

“None at all. The girls are very sweet. So, are you going to marry Miss Rossi?”

Josiah raised his eyebrow in surprise. “Does everyone know?”

Mrs. Watson shook her head. “No. But I know Marianne. Once she gets an idea in her head, nothing can stop her. She must have gotten the idea that you would be a good match.”

Josiah laughed sharply. "I need someone to look after the children."

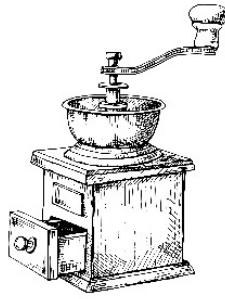
"Uh-hum," she said thoughtfully. "Pippa, don't pull on the rose bushes." Turning back to Josiah, she watched him thoughtfully. "It would be good for the girls. You, too. Marriage mellows a man. I remember my Henry was full of vim and vinegar. Once we married and had Pippa, he calmed right down."

"I remember Henry. He was a good friend."

"Miss Rossi seems very sweet. I think we could be friends; she looks like she needs one."

Josiah sat in silence and watched the children play. He thought about the events of the day and what transpired. There was no point in reopening the store for the remainder of the day, he had other matters to attend to.

Thank goodness tomorrow was Sunday, and the store was closed. He made a mental list of everything he needed to do -- and at the top, was to let the girls know that he was getting them a mother.



CHAPTER SIX



Victoria was the only one in the café. It was just after twelve o'clock, and she had eaten very lightly at Mrs. Hawthorne's that morning. Mrs. Hawthorne was getting ready for church and the repast was simply toast and soft eggs. Since Victoria woke late, all that was left was toast. But it was worth it.

The bed was the softest that she had ever slept on. The linens smelled like sunshine on a breezy day. No wonder she woke late. She prayed her stomach wouldn't rumble as she waited for Pearl to place her lunch on the table. A bowl of piping hot soup filled with beef and thickened with barley was placed in front of her, along with a basket of freshly made bread.

“We’ll be busy soon. Church will let out around one o’clock. So, you have a bit of time to enjoy the silence.”

“Thank you,” Victoria said as Pearl nodded and disappeared towards the front. Once Pearl was out of view, Victoria quickly slathered the bread with butter and dunked it in her soup. She rarely had butter with bread after her father died. And the only parts of the bread she was allowed, were the hard crusts. Fortunately, the heel of the bread was one of her favorite parts.

Once she finished her lunch, she looked at the watch pinned to her dress. Marianne should be joining her shortly.

“Anything else?” Pearl asked removing the dishes. Victoria had never seen a woman completely devoid of color – albino was the term her father told her. He had seen albinos on his travels around the world. Pearl’s hair was white as snow and her skin so translucent you could see the veins peppered underneath it. Her eyes were a cool violet and rimmed slightly in pink. She had pale lips and even her fingernails were devoid of the pinkish hue other women might have. Victoria thought Pearl was the most beautiful person she had ever seen.

“No, thank you. I’m just going to wait for Mrs. Gordon.” Victoria reached for her reticule. “How much do I owe you for lunch?”

“Not a penny,” Pearl smiled, her pale lips pulling back to reveal white teeth.

Victoria blinked. “Certainly, I owe you something?”

Pearl shook her head. “Your meals are being paid for by Mr. Altland.”

“Mr. Altland?” Victoria knew she sounded like a ninny.

“Yes. He said he’d pay for whatever you need. How about a nice cuppa tea, as Marianne would say?”

“That sounds lovely.”

The sound of a bell interrupted their conversation and Marianne strolled in. “Hello, Pearl,” she called, looking around the café. “You are rather empty right now.” She walked over to Victoria’s table and sat down. “Good morning, Miss Rossi.”

“Victoria, please. Pearl was just getting us tea.”

“Delightful.” Marianne clasped her hands and placed them on the table.

“Would you like anything else?” Pearl asked. Marianne shook her head. “Where’s

Michael?”

“Would you believe my brother, Caleb, and his wife arrived in town yesterday afternoon? Just unannounced. They are headed to Denver to meet up with his cattle train. So, Archie is keeping them company until I return.”

“Oh, I don’t want to keep you from your family,” Victoria said. “Perhaps we could meet tomorrow?”

“Nonsense. This meeting shouldn’t take too long.” Marianne looked at the table and brushed some breadcrumbs on the floor. Heat colored Victoria’s cheeks as she realized what a mess she had made; but lunch was just so delicious.

“How many brothers do you have?” Victoria asked, trying to divert the attention from her embarrassment.

“Five. Four living; one, Michael, was killed the day we arrived in Denver.”

“You named your son after him?”

Pearl returned with a tray containing a teapot and two cups. “Thank you,” Marianne said, pouring the tea. “Yes. He was named after my brother. I also have two sisters. My twin, Penny, and the youngest Alice.”

Victoria counted quickly on her fingers. “Eight children?”

Marianne laughed. "Pa said the winters were very cold, but the autumn would bring new blessings."

"Oh," Victoria whispered. When she realized what Marianne had said Victoria's eyes opened wide. "Oh!"

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"I have a step-uncle and a half-sister. My mother died when I was very little. Father remarried the following year. Jezzie was born shortly thereafter."

"Jezzie? That is an unusual name."

"It's short for Jezebel." Victoria took a cup of hot tea from Pearl and added a splash of milk and a sugar cube. "Byron is my step-uncle. He is Desdemona's brother. He came to live with us shortly after father got married." She took a sip of tea. "Something I don't understand though is Byron is supposed to be her brother. But they appear much closer than that."

"Byron? He's the reason you left Uniontown?"

Victoria nodded. "Yes. Desdemona wanted me to marry him immediately."

"And you didn't want to?"

A shiver went down Victoria's spine as she

thought about her previous life. “No. There was just something ... *off*... about him.”

“Well, I’m glad you are here. Did you think any more about what Mr. Altland proposed?”

“He suggested we try it for a few months. Then if it didn’t work out, we could seek an annulment.”

Marianne lifted her eyebrow. “Does that sound like something you want?”

“My father used to laugh at me. Said I had unrealistic expectations of marriage. I’d read these stories from a book in his library. They were filled with beautiful maidens that all found their happily ever afters.” Victoria placed her cup on the table. “I just want to be happy. To be safe... loved, even.”

Marianne reached over and rubbed her arm. “Those are human needs. I bet that once you and Josiah get to know each other, then all that talk of annulment will go out the window.”

“I just feel...”

Marianne lifted her hand. “Marmee taught me never to make any decisions when emotional. So don’t tell me what you feel. Tell me what you think.”

Victoria took a deep breath. “I think that once Mr. Altland finds out how worthless I am

that he'll send me back home."

Marianne sat back in the chair. "Who said you were worthless?" Victoria could hear the anger in Marianne's voice.

"My stepmother."

"Desdemona?" Victoria nodded. "Well look at the middle of her name. I think it says it all right there ... *demon*. You are not worthless, Victoria. You have a purpose in this life, and it may be as simple as loving those little girls. God gives us each talents. It is up to us to use them properly." Marianne leaned forward again. "Have you made a decision?"

"Yes. I'll go see Mr. Altland right after this meeting. He told me to come to the Haberdashery."

Marianne clapped her hands together in excitement. "Wonderful. You should get married right away." She pulled a thick notebook from her bag. "I don't know if the pastor has any openings in the calendar."

"I don't want to have to jump into anything," Victoria stated calmly. Marianne blinked several times.

"But it's completely improper for you to go back to his house if you're not married. You'll be watching the children, yes, but still, that is improper. What type of person would I be if I

allowed you to travel all this distance only to go to your new home as an unmarried woman?”

“I guess so.”

“It doesn’t look like the pastor is in town this week. He mentioned something about going to visit Cañon City.” Marianne tapped her pencil against her lips then flipped the page in her notebook. “Judge Hotchkiss is still presiding over that matter in South Platte River Valley.” She snapped her book closed, causing Victoria to jump. “That settles it. Archie can marry you. You can stay in the boarding house tonight and then come over to the office in the morning. It is the big Victorian house across from the park. The one with the tall tower and the red witches cap at the top. Chances are there will be a bunch of men outside drinking coffee. You can’t miss it.”

“I don’t know if I have enough funds to stay the night.”

Marianne waved her hand in the air. “Ask Mrs. Hawthorne to send the bill to my attention. Mr. Robert Altland paid for at least three nights. I’ll have to check the notes, but you should be fine.”

“What about last night?”

“What about it? That should be covered as well.”

Victoria breathed a sigh of relief. She had counted out the money she had sewn in the lining of her skirt and if she had to stay at the boarding house, she would be destitute by month's end. “I guess I should go see Mr. Altland, then. If he agrees, then we will stop by the office tomorrow morning.” Victoria picked up her reticule and draped the shawl around her shoulders.

She wore one of Jezebel's dresses. She borrowed it the afternoon the pastor came to visit and simply never returned it. Her half-sister had too many dresses to even notice one was missing. The dress was a deep red with tiny cream roses woven in a stripe pattern. Small ivory buttons decorated the bodice and sleeves. She didn't want to wear it while traveling, lest she soil or tear the fabric.

Waving to Pearl as she left the small café, she stood on the sidewalk and lifted her face to the sun. It felt warm on her cheeks. She closed her eyes for a moment and relished in the freedom of being able to stand there without worrying if she was going to make it home in time. She felt light and unburdened for the first time in her life. It was a feeling

she wanted to keep.

Opening her eyes, she glanced around and recalled the direction of the park. She had walked through it that morning on her way to the café. The air was warm, almost too warm for her shawl, so she draped it across one arm as she walked the few blocks to the park.

The heady scent of roses filled the air as she moved through the people leaving the churches surrounding the park. A child played with a small dog on the green as a mother watched while rocking a baby back and forth in a perambulator. For a moment Victoria wondered what it would be like to rock her baby in one of the fine carriages.

She passed a food vendor, shilling sausages to the hungry patrons and a man selling balloons. She watched as he pulled a balloon from his pocket and blew it into a long cylindrical shape. She had never seen fingers move so quickly as he tied the end of the balloon and then twisted and bent it into the shape of a dog. He handed it to a little girl who squealed and ran off to show her parents.

Victoria smiled as the man turned and spied her. He walked over, trailing a bouquet of balloons behind him.

“Would you like a balloon, young lady?”

he asked, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a handful of deflated rubber. Grasping one with his teeth, he shoved the rest back in his pocket and made an elaborate show of inflating the balloon.

Victoria laughed as the man huffed and puffed to inflate the elongated balloon. She had never seen anything so entertaining. With a quick flick of his wrists, he presented Victoria with a red horse. At least she thought it was a horse.

“How much is it?” she asked warily.

“Only a penny.”

“Can you do another one? I have two little girls.” She rummaged through her reticule and pulled out two coins.

“Lucky girls to have you for their mama,” the man said pocketing the coins and handing the red balloon to Victoria. He pulled the balloons out of his pocket and laid them on his hand, displaying the colors to her. “Any color in particular?”

“Let’s do red again. That way there isn’t any fighting over the color.”

“Smart lady,” the huckster said. He blew up the balloon and created a dog before handing it to Victoria. “I hope your daughters enjoy them.”

“Oh, they aren’t....” Before she could complete the thought, the man was already walking down the sidewalk towards another group of children, his balloons bouncing as he walked. Victoria looked at the two balloon animals in her hand. What possessed her to spend two cents on balloon animals? Every bit of money was needed and now she just frivoleed away a bit.

Sighing, the joy of seeing the man create the creatures disappeared and was replaced with worry. What would she do if Mr. Altland changed his mind? She walked across the greenway until she came to the row of shops. The haberdashery was right on the end, exactly where Mr. Altland said it was.

There was a set of steps on the outside of the building leading to a door on the second level. Hiking her skirt just a bit, she climbed the steps and stood in front of the wooden door. She lifted her face and closed her eyes once more. A slight breeze brushed against her cheeks, and she was reminded of what Marianne had said. She had a purpose, even if it was to just love these two little girls.

Careful not to pop the balloons, she placed them in one hand and knocked on the door. The sound of scampering could be heard, as

well as a child's voice calling. Victoria smiled. That had to have been Jane.

It only took a moment for the door to open and Josiah was standing there with a smile on his face. Jane's face was covered in flour, and she had transferred it to Josiah's pant leg as she hugged him. Victoria giggled. Winnie pushed in front of her uncle and sister and grabbed Victoria's hand.

"You're here," she said. "We are making pancakes."

"I can see that," Victoria replied. "Oh here," she handed each girl a balloon. "I got these for you in the park."

Jane squealed as she grabbed the animal with flour-covered fingers and ran back towards the kitchen. Winnie released Victoria's hand to grab her animal and follow Jane. "Thank you!" Winnie called as she disappeared down the hall.

"You came," Josiah said. His cheeks lifted as his mouth broke into a smile.

Victoria thought her heart might burst from her chest. She had never met anyone so handsome, and so unaware of how handsome he might be. Byron would constantly flaunt his prowess, but Victoria could see that Josiah was a completely different type of man.

“I came,” she whispered.

Josiah moved back to allow her to enter the apartment. “Are you hungry?”

“No. Thank you, though. I had a bowl of soup at the café.”

“You didn’t eat at the boarding house? I thought breakfast was included.”

Victoria laughed. “It is included if you wake up early enough. I was so tired I overslept.”

“Do you do that often?”

Her breath hitched. Was he worried she was lazy? “It was just from traveling. I normally get up in plenty of time.” She watched as his face relaxed once she said she didn’t make a habit of getting up late.

“Of course. Please come in. How about a cup of coffee?”

Victoria stepped into the foyer of the small apartment. “That would be lovely.” She followed him down the hallway to a small room. The kitchen was on the left and the girls were playing with their balloon animals and a pile of flour. She pursed her lips so she wouldn’t laugh.

“It would probably be easier if you sit in here,” he said, directing her to a small sitting

room across from the kitchen. "I'll be right back."

Victoria entered the small room. There were two large chairs on the far wall with a small table between them. The other two walls were covered in shelves and contained books from top to bottom. She ran her fingers over the spines as she made her way to one of the chairs. Her father had a room like this. She would love to escape with him and listen to him read aloud.

She had just settled in when Josiah returned with two cups of coffee. He handed one to Victoria. She took a sip of the bitter brew and wrinkled her face. "Oh gracious," she said, placing the cup on the small table. "That is strong."

"Oh, I don't have any sugar left up here. The girls used it all. I can run downstairs if you want sugar."

"No. It isn't necessary. I didn't come to drink coffee." A frown appeared on Josiah's otherwise handsome features. His forehead wrinkled in worry as he put his cup down and then leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I've thought about your offer, Mr. Altland," she said rushing through her words. "I would like to marry you.... and the girls. If

you will have me.”

Josiah jumped up from his chair and pulled Victoria up to him in a hug. “Thank you. Thank you.” He kissed her cheek, his lips warm where they pressed against her skin. She gave a little gasp. Josiah immediately loosened his hold. “Forgive me, Miss Rossi, I was simply a little too excited.”

“Are you going to be our Ma now?” Winnie asked.

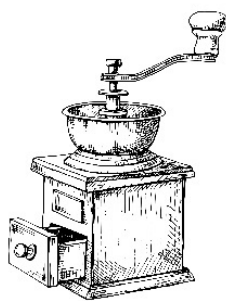
Victoria moved forward and leaned down towards the young girl. Brushing the dark hair from Winnie’s face, she lifted the little girl’s chin. “I’d like that very much.”

“Me too,” Jane said, wrapping her arms around Victoria’s legs.

Victoria stood and opened her arm, embracing Winnie and Jane with one arm. The other she held open towards Josiah. She could see a moment’s hesitation on his face before he moved forward and wrapped his arms around her and the girls.

It had been so long since anyone had hugged her, she felt a sob bubble up from her throat. She gave a nervous laugh to cover the overwhelming feelings rising inside her. As she felt Josiah’s kiss press against her head, Victoria said a prayer of thanks as she was

wrapped in the loving embrace of her new family.



CHAPTER SEVEN



Victoria clenched her hands. She had never been so nervous. She arrived at the office ten minutes early since she couldn't eat due to the nerves.

Mrs. Hawthorne was gracious enough to offer Victoria a private bath. It had been so long since Victoria was able to enjoy such luxuries, she stayed in the water until her skin pruned. The only dresses she had were the velvet riding habit, the red dress that she took from Jezebel and a plain day dress that was extremely worn.

The red dress didn't seem right for a wedding, so she dressed in the green riding habit. Looking at her reflection in the mirror

she sighed. She had brushed her hair until it shone and put it up in a chignon with ringlets hanging down the back. Her skin looked pale, and she wished she had some rouge. Pinching her cheeks provided a bit of color and she bit her lips until they were puffed and the color of dark roses.

Her ministrations didn't matter, because ... *her dress.*

What once was a beautiful outfit that she wore riding with her father, was now starting to show signs of wear. She remembered the day he gave it to her. It was her fourteenth birthday and she never had anything so grand.

Looking back, she should have seen the jealousy in Desdemona's eyes.

It didn't take long for Jezebel to borrow the dress and not return it.

Victoria tore Jezebel's room apart and found the dress crushed in a trunk. Victoria spent two days scrubbing the stains from the velvet. The dress was never the same, but it was the last connection she had to her father.

Now the bright fabric was dull and stained. The threads at the shoulders were starting to tear and when Victoria turned, she could see the fabric of her shift peeking out from the fabric. It was not a dress she could get married

in.

Sighing, she quickly undressed and grabbed the red gown, shrugging it over her head, careful not to destroy her curls. Fastening the buttons, she gave herself one quick turn to make sure nothing was out of place. Grabbing her hat and reticule, she raced from the building and down the road towards the building where she was going to marry Josiah.

Victoria Altland.

The name rolled off her tongue.

Humming a tune, she strolled down the street towards the park. She looked at the paper with the address written on it. *Chain Bridge Road*. She remembered seeing that on the other side of the park.

She walked past the row of shops, and was almost tempted to stop at the haberdashery, but Josiah said that they would simply meet her at the office. She wondered if he was going to bring the children. She had totally forgotten to ask when she left to go back to the boarding house.

She crossed the street and walked through the park until she reached her destination.

There was the building, just as Marianne described.

The house had a steeply pitched roof and a large tower. Victoria giggled. The top of the tower did look like a witch's hat. Five pillars surrounded an opulent porch with hanging baskets, cascading with flowers between the posts. The house was warm and inviting.

As she approached the front, she could read the large sign in gold letters.

The Pinkerton Detective Agency, Denver Co. Office.

She didn't realize that this is where she was going to get married. When Marianne said her husband could marry them, she thought that Mr. Gordon was a preaching man. But instead, she was standing in front of a beautiful office with men drinking coffee on the front porch.

"Morning, ma'am," one of the men said as she approached.

"G-g-good morning," Victoria stammered. "I was looking for Mrs. Gordon."

"Marianne?" one of the men asked. Victoria nodded. "I think I saw her. Let me show you to the library and then I'll go find her."

Victoria followed the man into the foyer. If she thought the outside of the home was lavish, it was nothing compared to the inside.

Her heels sounded against the polished wood floors. A table with a vase filled with flowers sat underneath a window overlooking a garden. The walls were painted a muted blue.

She could hear dishes clanking in the background and her belly rumbled. She pressed her hand against her stomach, willing it to be quiet. The man led her to a pair of French doors and opened one, waving her into the room.

“If you just wait here,” he said, before turning on his heel and leaving the room.

Victoria looked around the small library. Shelves, filled with books, covered the wall from floor to ceiling. Tucked into corners of the shelves were daguerreotypes of different couples. There were dozens of such pictures lining the shelves.

“Victoria. It is so good to see you.”

Victoria turned to see Marianne waltz in the room. She was wearing a green dress with a white collar trimmed in lace. Black buttons decorated the front of the bodice. Victoria felt very out of place in her red dress. She curled her fingers around the fabric.

“Has Josiah arrived yet?”

“Not yet, but he will soon. Would you like a cup of tea?”

“No thank you.” Victoria looked down at the wrinkled fabric of her skirt. “This was the only dress I had. I know it is red...”

“Would you like something different? You look lovely, but I understand...”

“I didn’t have time to go to the dress shop.”

Marianne didn’t press Victoria’s excuse. Instead, she looked around the library. “I used to spend hours in this room when I lived here.”

“You lived here?”

Marianne nodded. “Yes. On the third floor. I lived here until I married Archie, then we purchased a townhome in town.”

“I didn’t realize this was a business. I mean, I realize it is a business, I just...” Victoria lifted her finger to her lips. “I guess I don’t know what I’m trying to say.”

“That’s alright. I remember walking by this house every day when it was abandoned. Then Archie moved in. I came to work for him, along with Pearl. Soon we had female detectives join the agency. Things moved very rapidly after that. But at its heart, this building is still a home. It was someone’s home. Now it is part of our home.”

“Are all these agents?” Victoria pointed to

the daguerreotypes.

Marianne nodded. “Yes. They are all married now, but that is a story for another time.” She gave Victoria a little smile. “I still have a closet upstairs. I think there might even be a cream dress in there. Would you like to have a look?”

Victoria couldn’t believe that Marianne was offering her a dress. “I don’t have any money...”

Marianne raised her hand. “Don’t be silly. You are getting married. I would never dream of asking for money.” She looped her arm through Victoria’s and led her from the small library. “In fact, I think there are quite a few dresses up there in need of a good home.”

Victoria grinned from ear to ear. “I’d like that.”

“Good,” Marianne said, patting her hand. “Let’s get you ready to be married.”



“What are we doing here, Uncle Josiah?” Winnie asked.

Josiah looked down at his nieces. They were dressed in matching blue princess dresses with a black panel running down the center. Winnie wore black tights and high-topped

boots with a scallop vamp. Jane had white tights with black slippers that had a strap over the foot to hold them in place.

Their grandmother visited that morning to help get them ready. She was thrilled that the girls were going to have a new mother. She and her husband were getting up in years and she didn't think it would be fair to have the girls lose another caregiver.

She made sure the girls were bathed and their hair curled before pulling it back in a bow. It made Josiah's heart hurt as he could see both his brother and sister-in-law in the two little girls. He rubbed his chest as the memories overwhelmed him.

"Uncle Josiah?" Jane tugged on his sleeve.

Dismissing the thoughts of Robert and his wife, Josiah pulled the girls close. "We are here to marry Miss Rossi."

"All of us?"

Josiah nodded. "All of us."

The front door opened, and he spied Mrs. Gordon standing in the doorway. "We've been expecting you. Would you girls like a treat while we wait?" She held her hand out towards the girls who nodded eagerly. They raced up the porch steps and disappeared into the house. Josiah followed the girls to the

door and stopped in front of Mrs. Gordon.

“Thank you for doing this, Mrs. Gordon.”

“Please. Call me Marianne. It is my pleasure. I’m normally not wrong with the matches I make. I have a good feeling about the two of you. Let things progress naturally.” She moved inside the foyer. “Victoria will be down in a minute. She was just freshening up.”

Josiah walked into the house with the polished floors and grand staircase. He was surprised to hear Marianne say that Victoria was freshening up. He thought she would have done that at the boarding house.

Where did the girls go? he wondered.

A large man with long dark hair came out of an office with one girl on each hip. Josiah recognized him as Mr. Wauneka, the man leading the new crop of police officers in Denver. “Do these belong to you?”

Jane giggled. “Put us down!” Winnie joined in the laughter.

“Yes, they do,” Josiah laughed. “Sorry they were disturbing you.”

“Not at all. I love children. I have two of my own.” He dropped the girls gently to the floor and turned back to the office. “I’ll stop by in a few days, Archie, to let you know what

I find out.”

“Much appreciated, Bronco,” a red-haired man with a short beard answered as he came into the main area. “I look forward to the report.” Josiah recognized him as Archie Gordon, the main agent at the office. Once Bronco left, Archie turned to Josiah and held out his hand. “Are you the groom?”

Josiah cleared his throat. “Yes sir, Josiah Altland,” he said, shaking Archie’s hand.

“Marianne told me what happened. I’m sorry about your brother.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Archie looked around the room. “Where’s the bride.”

“She should be right down,” Marianne offered.

“You look awful pretty,” Winnie’s voice called over the crowd.

Josiah turned and he grabbed his stomach as if he had been sucker punched. He felt the breath leave his body as he looked at Victoria coming down the stairs. She glided effortlessly and he wondered if her feet were even touching the floor. She truly was an angel.

She wore a long cream dress with a bustle at the back. The sleeves were opaque and

ballooned at the shoulders before tightening around her upper arm. Long cream gloves covered the rest of her arms, and she held a folded fan in one hand.

The dress was cinched at the waist before cascading down in many layers of fabric, lace and ribbon roses. Small pearl buttons decorated the bodice and a short veil covered Victoria's hair. Her cheeks and lips were colored, and she appeared to blush as she looked down from the steps above.

Josiah licked his lips, his mouth suddenly dry. He felt Jane tug his sleeve. "Don't you think she looks pretty?" Josiah nodded, words escaping him. He had never seen a more beautiful woman in his life.

She lifted the front of her skirt as she stepped down from the last step. Josiah could see she was wearing a pair of beaded calf slippers. He wondered if Marianne had something to do with Victoria's wedding outfit. Either way, he was extremely pleased to see the woman in front of him.

"Josiah." Victoria's voice was no more than a whisper. "You look lovely, girls."

"You look like a princess," Winnie confessed. She reached up to touch Victoria's veil.

Victoria smiled at Winnie and leaned down to give her a kiss. Jane ran up for a hug.

“Are you ready?” Archie asked. Victoria nodded and released the girls. She moved closer to Josiah and looped her hand through his arm. Archie moved closer to a large fireplace against one wall. “We can do this here.”

Josiah saw the agent rummage through the inside of his jacket. When he didn’t find what he was looking for, Archie started to pat his pant pockets.

“Here you go,” Marianne said softly, handing him a small notebook.

“Thank you,” Archie said. “Before we begin, I want to make sure that you are settled in your decision. This isn’t an act to take lightly. But reverently. Miss Rossi?”

“I know,” Victoria responded. “Robert was looking for a wife and mother to his children. Josiah is looking for a mother to those same children and I had already agreed to be that person. Is there something you are concerned about?”

Archie shook his head. “No. Are you settled in your decision, Mr. Altland?”

Josiah looked once more at Victoria. He knew he promised to give their marriage six

months but having her stand in front of him made him unsure. How would he release her at the end of six months? He lifted his finger and traced Victoria's cheek. "I'm sure." He cleared his throat. "I'm sure," he said louder.

"Grand. Just grand. May I have your full name?"

"Victoria. Victoria Rossi."

"Splendid. Do you have a middle name, Miss Rossi?"

"Paige."

"Victoria Paige Rossi. That is a beautiful name." Archie turned to Josiah as he scribbled in the notebook. "Josiah, what is your middle name?"

"Ari."

"Thank you." Archie folded the pencil inside the notebook. "Did you bring a ring?"

The ring?

Josiah rolled his eyes and groaned. How could he have forgotten to get a ring? He saw disappointment flash over Victoria's face. "In all the excitement, I completely forgot."

"I understand," she said softly. "I don't need..."

"No," Josiah hastily injected. "You do. I simply forgot. I hope you can forgive me, and

I'll get you a ring as soon as possible." Victoria nodded. Why was she so agreeable? It made Josiah feel even worse. How could he forget a wedding ring for his bride? Robert would be turning over in his grave.

"Mrs. Gordon will serve as a witness. Let us begin." He motioned to Victoria to move closer to Josiah. "Dearly beloved..."

She looked into Josiah's eyes, not paying attention to the words Archie was saying. Josiah was smiling down at her and Victoria basked under the warmth of his gaze.

"Miss Rossi?"

"Oh!" Victoria exclaimed, looking at Mr. Gordon. "I am sorry. What did you say?"

Archie gave a low chuckle. "Happens all the time. We are speaking your vows. Repeat after me. "I, Victoria Paige Rossi..."

Victoria repeated the phrase. And the next, and the one after that, until her vows were complete. Then she looked at the preacher once more.

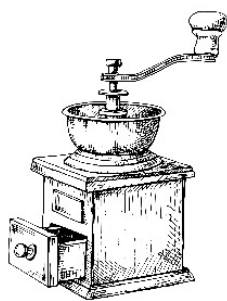
"Now your turn. Repeat after me. I, Josiah Ari Altland..." Josiah repeated his vows. "And now the ring... Oh, wait, that's right."

Josiah winced. He lifted Victoria's hand and kissed where the ring should be. "I promise to take care of it."

“You are now married, and you may kiss your bride.”

Victoria looked up at Josiah. Hesitation clouded her features. *Should he kiss her?* It wouldn't be a real marriage unless he did. Josiah wavered for only a moment before cupping her face in his palms and leaning down to press their lips together, sealing the marriage.

It only lasted a second, but he wanted it to last much longer. Breaking the kiss, he pressed his forehead to hers. “We'll make this work, Mrs. Altland.”



CHAPTER EIGHT



Mrs. Altland.

Victoria wanted to cry. She was now married to an honorable man who wanted the best for his nieces. So why was she so emotional? Perhaps it was that she wished her father could have been here.

“Congratulations to you both,” Mr. Gordon said. “If you can come this way to sign the ledger, I’ll have your marriage certificate drawn up.” They followed Mr. Gordon into a large office with a bay window. Victoria looked around at the dark furniture and the walls with knife marks.

Knife marks?

She didn’t dare ask.

“Sign here,” Mr. Gordon directed, handing a fountain pen to Josiah. Josiah scribbled his name, bold strokes marring the page. Josiah handed the pen to Victoria before pointing to the line next to his name.

She wrote her full name, Victoria Paige Rossi. Her handwriting was elegant and small compared to his.

Looking at her signature she smiled and crossed out Rossi, replacing it with Altland. *There.* That was her new name now, she might as well use it. She handed the fountain pen back to Mr. Gordon, who blotted the ink before closing the book.

“We have cake and tea in the dining room,” Marianne offered. “Pearl made it in celebration of this special occasion.”

Jane jumped up and down. “Cake!”

Marianne took each of the girls by the hand and led them towards the hallway.

Victoria looked at Josiah. She couldn’t believe this man was now her husband. He looked very dashing in his charcoal suit.

“Shall we join our children, Mrs. Altland?”

Our children.

Victoria couldn’t speak. Her heart was about to burst from her chest. Who would

think that two little words would set her heart afire? But they did.

Our children.

She hoped she wouldn't cry before they arrived home. Without a word, she took Josiah's arm and went to celebrate her new family.

After a quick repast of cake and lemonade, Victoria changed from the beautiful bridal gown Marianne loaned her into a traveling suit that was left behind by one of the female detectives.

They left with a flourish of fanfare from the agents who threw rice as the new family walked down the porch steps. The girls relished the attention and Jane tossed handfuls of rice back at the larger-than-life detectives. Josiah carried a carpet bag with Victoria's red dress and two day dresses in it. She was so thankful to her new friend, and appreciative that she didn't need to spend what little bit of money she had left on new clothes.

They walked back to the haberdashery where Victoria could see a sign on the front door. As they got closer, she could see that it was written in a child's handwriting. The sign said, "Closed. Off to get married."

“Did you write that, Winnie?” Victoria asked. The child beamed with pride. Victoria pulled Winnie close in a side hug. “It is a very beautiful sign.”

“I thought we could gather the girls’ things and then head out to the farm.”

“The farm?” Victoria pursed her lips. “Why are we going to the farm?”

He unlocked the door, and the girls ran into the shop and up the stairs hidden behind a curtain. Josiah held the door open for Victoria. “I thought that you would be more comfortable out there. I had every intention of selling the farm, but now that you are here it can be cleaned up and it will be a wonderful place to raise the girls. I promise to be out there every Sunday when the shop is closed.”

Victoria was halfway across the shop when Josiah’s words clamored in her ears. “What? Sunday?”

Josiah locked the door and nodded. “Yes. I have to be here, and the farm will be a wonderful place for you and the girls.”

Not even married a day and he was already trying to get rid of her! How could she be so stupid?

“Why wouldn’t we stay here?”

Josiah blinked several times. “Why would

you? There isn't enough room in the apartment and the farm is the girls' home. It is their inheritance. You wouldn't want them to lose it, would you?"

Victoria clenched her hands. She could feel the nails digging into her palms. He knew exactly what buttons to push. That farm was all the girls had. At least no one could take it away from them as Desdemona did with Victoria's father's things. Yes, he knew exactly what buttons to push. She would do everything to protect what little bit those darling girls had left.

She clenched her teeth so hard she thought her teeth might break. "I – I need," she started before clearing her throat. "I need to go back to the boarding house and get my belongings."

"Of course. We can go on our way to the farm."

Victoria lifted her fingers to her chest and pressed in the middle against the bone. She felt a burning rising from her belly, and she would be darned if she was going to give Josiah the satisfaction of seeing her cry. Taking several deep breaths and willing the tears to disappear, she nodded and followed Josiah upstairs.



Josiah couldn't figure out why Victoria was so upset. They had a lovely wedding, an intimate reception, and a brisk walk back to the Haberdashery. He would have thought she would be happy. He even decided to place her at the farmhouse where she could be outside in nature, the girls could run and play, and he knew they would be safe.

What could be the matter?

He ran his hand down his face and rubbed the back of his neck. This. This was why he hadn't been courting or engaged before. Women were just too complicated.

Sighing, he led her into the apartment. The girls' suitcases were already in the hallway. He dropped the carpetbag next to it. He didn't know why Marianne gave Victoria clothes. Certainly, she had her own clothes to wear.

He did have to admit that she cut a fine figure in the tailored suit.

"Jane. Winnie. Come on. We should go."

Jane came running around the corner with her dolly under one arm. "Winnie is getting her hair bows," she said.

"I'll go help her," Victoria offered and disappeared down the hallway.

Josiah picked up the carpet bag, tucking it underneath his arm, and grabbed the

suitcases.

“Stay here. I’m going to go get the buggy and bring it to the front of the store.” Jane nodded eagerly. “Victoria,” he called. She popped her head from around the corner. “I’ll be right back. Be downstairs at the door in five minutes.” He watched her nod and disappear around the door again.

It only took a few moments for him to drop the bags by the front door of the shop and leave to walk to the livery where he kept his buggy and a horse. Once the horse was hitched to the carriage, he returned to the shop to find Victoria and the girls waiting for him, just as he asked.

The buggy had one bench with a little bit of space behind the seat. Josiah had bought it from a doctor who was retiring. Josiah almost felt like he was stealing it, especially when the doctor offered the horse for just five dollars more.

He placed the bags behind the bench and then offered his hand to Victoria. She walked past him and climbed into the buggy, scooting over to the far side. Josiah shook his head.

“Come on, Winnie,” he said lifting the young girl in the buggy. Jane scrambled up the side and over her sister to sit on Victoria’s

lap. There wasn't much room at all. Even with Jane curled up in Victoria's arms, it was a tight fit for two adults with a little girl between them. Josiah made sure the door to the shop was locked and climbed into the buggy. "We'll go to the boarding house first."

"That's fine," Victoria said, looking forward. Josiah watched her press a kiss to Jane's head.

He was going to say something but thought better of it. Snapping the reins, the horse moved forward taking the girls and Victoria to their new home.



She wouldn't cry. *She wouldn't.*

Victoria pressed her nose in Jane's reddish locks. The little girl smelled like milk and flowers. Victoria wrapped her arms around the small child. Jane put her head down and with small fingers, played with the timepiece pinned to Victoria's jacket.

The buggy jostled the passengers as it traversed over the rocky roads. It only took a few minutes to arrive at the boarding house. Josiah pulled the buggy to a stop at the corner. Victoria passed Jane over to him and she hopped from the carriage. She didn't even stop to see if Josiah was going to assist her.

Mrs. Hawthorne was waiting in the sitting room with Victoria's bag and a picnic hamper. "I cooked you a ham and made some bread."

"Thank you," Victoria said. "You didn't have to do that."

"You don't want to cook on your wedding night. There are also some cookies in there for the girls."

Victoria took the basket and her carpetbag. "I will bring the basket back the next time I'm in town."

"Take your time," Mrs. Hawthorne waved as Victoria walked down the townhouse steps towards the buggy.

She added her bag to the ones behind the seat. The hamper was too large to fit, so Victoria tucked it underneath Winnie's feet. Once they were situated again, Josiah clicked to the horse. The ride to the farm was uneventful. Jane fell asleep in Victoria's arms and Winnie sang a nursery rhyme softly under her breath.

Victoria watched Josiah look forward as they traveled. His jaw was set, and she could see the slight tic of a muscle in his cheek. He was upset about something. There was no reason for him to be, Victoria thought. He wasn't the one being left at a farm in an area

he didn't know.

The silence was driving her batty. There was one thing that Victoria couldn't stand and that was when someone stewed in silence. She needed to say something. Anything. "How much further?" she asked.

Josiah turned to look at her, his warm brown eyes studying her intently. "Not far. About three miles outside of town."

Victoria watched as the buildings became more spread out until there were none. They were surrounded by trees, craggy rocks, and birds soaring overhead. She looked up and closed her eyes, allowing the sun to warm her face. The buggy swayed her to a half-sleep and when she opened her eyes, she could see they were approaching a wooden fence with a farmhouse just off the road. A medium-sized barn sat to one side, and a chicken house, without chickens, sat on the other. A large dog with fur the color of sun-bleached leather slept under a tree.

Victoria didn't know what she had imagined the house to look like. She was so worried about getting away from home that she didn't think about what she was getting into. Robert described the house as needing a few repairs, but what stood before her was

beyond that.

The house was small but boasted two levels. Glass windows on both floors allowed light to filter through. Those were the only nice things she could say about the dwelling. The building needed tearing down and rebuilding.

The roof was damaged, and the exterior needed a new paint job. What she thought was white paint appeared to be yellowing with age and dirt. There was a raised porch along the front of the house. One step was missing and there was a hole in the middle of the porch.

“I guess it was neglected since Robert died.”

It was neglected for longer than that. How could Robert raise his children in such a hovel? How could Josiah bring them back to this?

“Come on, poppets,” Victoria cooed as she rocked the sleeping, Jane. “Show me your home.”

“It’s your home too,” Winnie said.

“You are right. It is our home.”

Victoria allowed Josiah to assist her from the buggy, so she didn’t disturb Jane.

“Watch your step,” he said, walking her to

the stairs. "Stay on the side of the steps."

"That will need to be fixed immediately," Victoria noted. "Along with that hole over there."

"I'll see if there is any wood in the barn."

As Victoria approached the door, she thought she heard scurrying under the floorboards. She shuddered and chose to ignore what might be making the sound. Quickly pushing the door inside, the house moaned as if welcoming her.

The inside of the house was one large room with an iron cook stove, a few pieces of wooden furniture, and a braided rug that had seen better days. A small cupboard stood against one wall and a door led underneath the stairs.

"That's the pantry," Josiah offered, dropping the bags on the ground.

Victoria nodded. She slid Jane to the ground. "Wake up, sleepyhead," she cooed. "Josiah, can you open a window?"

Josiah opened the windows at the front of the house while Victoria opened one on the opposite wall. A cool breeze passed through the room. She peeked out the window to see the dog had woken up and was walking slowly through an overgrown garden, nibbling on the

plants. *The poor creature!* It must be starving.

Victoria never owned a dog before. Desdemona refused to have one in the house. Said they were nasty, dirty creatures. But Desdemona wasn't here. Victoria's eyes scanned the garden. It would take a bit of hard work, but she could get the garden back in shape. The chicken coop appeared to be in good shape. She would mention to Josiah about getting a few chickens for eggs and meat.

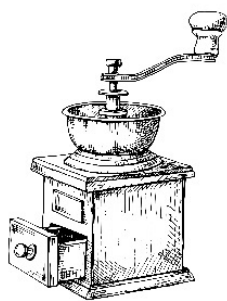
She spied a water pump with a bucket underneath. A clothesline ran from the pole near the water pump and disappeared around the side of the house. She turned to find Josiah had disappeared. She walked to the front porch and saw him leading the horse to the barn.

Since she didn't know where the suitcases belonged, she moved them to the side of the door. Picking up the picnic basket, she sat it on the table. Dust swirling in the air caught her eye and she looked closely where she just put the basket. Running her fingers across the wooden top, she lifted her hand to see gray dust balls clinging to her fingers.

She would need to clean everything before she prepared food in the kitchen. Why should

she be surprised about the state of the house? It was apparent that Victoria was never going to be anything more than a scullery maid.

She was determined to make this house a home. Her home. Moving the basket onto the iron cook stove, she took off her jacket and grabbed a wooden bucket. It was time to roll up her sleeves and get to work.



CHAPTER NINE



“You are the biggest fool I’ve ever met.”

Josiah stopped pinning the sleeves of the jacket and looked at his customer. Archie Gordon stood on a turned-over apple box and was being fitted for a new suit.

“Excuse me?” Josiah said.

Since he married Victoria, his shop had more business than he could ever imagine. Every day he had one of the Pinkerton Agents stop in for new clothing. At this rate, Josiah was going to have to hire someone to help him tailor all the orders.

“You heard me,” Archie replied in his gruff Scottish accent. “I dunna suffer fools lightly, I’ll have ye know.”

Josiah slid the last pin through the fabric and stood up. "I don't think I'm following," he replied, walking back to the counter to put his tailor's chalk, pincushion and tape measure in his toolbox.

"Marianne told me that you aren't living with your wife. What type of marriage did I perform?"

"I go over every Sunday for dinner."

Archie stepped down from the box and carefully slid off the jacket, handing it to Josiah. "Every Sunday? You only see your wife once a week and those two darling girls? They need a man in their life. I guess'un you aren't the man I hoped you were."

Josiah put the jacket on the counter. "I don't think it is any of your business."

Archie pulled out his wallet and placed several bills on the counter. "You are right. It isn't; but let me tell you this. Victoria is a charming woman. Smart, kind. She loves those girls as if they were her own. But she deserves love too. When I think about all the time I wasted before I finally married Marianne, I could just...." He slid on his jacket and placed a bowler-type hat on top of his head. "Well, the past is in the past. But there is still time to fix the future."

“What are you suggesting?”

“Perhaps you should go to the farm. Or find another house in town that is big enough for your family.”

“I know Victoria likes it on the farm.”

“Then there is your answer. Sometimes we make sacrifices for the ones we love.”

“I don’t love her,” Josiah protested.

“How can you love her if you don’t spend time with her? I’ll be by to pick up my suit jacket in five days. Until then, think about what I’ve said.”

As he watched Archie retreat from the store, the words the man spoke weighed heavily on Josiah’s mind. Once he was alone in the store, Josiah took the pinned jacket and added it to the pile of others to be hemmed. The stack was growing taller. *He did need some help.* He’d put a sign in the window tomorrow morning. Perhaps there was a seamstress that was looking to take in extra work.

Flipping the sign closed, he lowered the wicks on the oil lamps and headed upstairs to his lonely apartment. As he stood in the foyer of his apartment, he took a deep breath and strained his ears for any sound. There was none.

Where he once relished his solitude, now it

mocked him.

No children's toys littered the hallway. There wasn't flour on the table from Winnie trying to make bread with her grandmother. He hadn't seen Sarah's parents in a while. He wondered if they ever visited the farm.

He missed those girls. Mostly, he missed Victoria. If he were honest, there was something about her that was pure and wholesome. Not many people would take in two strangers' children. Not many people would keep the children once their guardian abandoned them.

Josiah closed his eyes tightly. Archie was right. *He was a fool.*

He left Victoria to deal with his responsibilities. It didn't matter if he hired a man to take care of some of the odd jobs around the farm. Victoria and those girls were still his responsibility.

He had only been to the farm four times since they were married. And every time, Victoria appeared happy to see him. She was gracious and made the most wonderful meal. He looked forward to the Sunday afternoons he spent with her.

Walking into the kitchen he looked in the cupboard. There was nothing that appealed to

him. Victoria had canned soup for him to eat during the week, but not even the glass jars filled with meat and vegetables could tempt him.

He wondered if it was too late to ride to the farm. If he didn't hitch the buggy, he could be there quicker. Changing from the dress pants and shirt he wore in the shop, he put on a plain cotton shirt and a pair of doeskin riding breeches. The breeches were a little snug in the legs as he hadn't worn them in nearly three years, which was the last time he had been riding. He could handle a little snugness.

As he reached down to pick up his boots, he noticed the box on his side table. Picking it up, he opened the top and gazed at the plain gold band inside. He purchased it the day after he took Victoria and the children home, and promptly forgot about it until each Sunday when he arrived at the farm. He needed to rectify that immediately. He didn't have a pocket big enough for the box, so he took the ring out and slid it on his smallest finger. It fit perfectly. He hoped it would fit Victoria's small hands.

Slipping his feet into tall riding boots, he grabbed a short jacket and headed towards the

livery.



“Shoo!” Victoria snapped her apron at the dog she named Rags due to its shaggy coat. The dog had the most beautiful brown face with golden eyes. Instead of large pupils, small black rectangles divided the eye. The dog had the most unusual sound when it barked. More of a high-pitched shrill instead of the low thunderous tones she had read about in books. It didn’t matter. She loved Rags all the same.

The dog liked to come to the house to escape the afternoon heat. The first time it happened, Victoria was aghast. Rags pushed open the door and wandered to the small sitting area and hopped on the settee. Victoria tried to move the dog, but it looked at her with those large eyes and let loose a sound that curled her toes. Once the nap was done, the dog trotted outside as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

She meant to mention to Topper that the door latch needed fixing, but every time she saw the old man Josiah had hired to help around the farm, they ended up discussing other matters and Victoria forgot all about the door.

The current project was to build a fence

around the garden. Rags was starting to eat her seedlings as they emerged from the ground. She would like to be able to put up *some* food for the winter, but if the dog continued rooting through the garden, she wouldn't have anything left.

One thing Victoria did notice, is that Rags never went near the potato plot. At least she'd have potatoes to feed the girls this winter.

"Shoo!" she said again. Rags looked at her with large eyes, barked, and trotted off the porch. "Girls!" she called. "Come in, it is almost time for supper!"

Winnie and Jane were feeding the chickens near the barn. Topper sat on a stump whistling a stick watching them. He was old enough to be Victoria's grandfather, and he adored both the girls. His own family had moved back east, and he didn't want to join them. Securing a job at the farm provided him food, shelter and he helped around the farm with repairs and ... wayward dogs. Victoria insisted that he take his meals with the family. They didn't have much, but what they did have, Victoria insisted they share.

Jane brushed the corn dust from her hands. "Are you coming, Topper?" she asked.

"I just need to finish this and wash up. You

should go wash up too,” the old man gently said.

“It will be on the table in about twenty minutes.” She held open the door so the girls could scoot inside. As she turned to go in, she noticed a cloud of dust coming down the road. The farm was so far out, rarely did she have visitors. “Are you expecting anyone, Topper?”

The old man stood, his back curved from years of hard work, and he shuffled over to the edge of the fence. “Nope. Don’t recognize him either.”

Victoria watched as the horse and rider moved closer. The man stood tall in the saddle. A stovepipe hat sat on top of his head. There was something familiar about him as he moved into the yard.

“Whoa!” she heard him call. He stopped next to Topper and slid off the horse. The man had pale riding pants with a dark-colored jacket. His boots were so shiny, they reflected the sun that was beginning to set in the sky.

As he turned to walk towards the house, Victoria’s fingers went up to her lips. “Josiah! What are you doing here?”

“I came to have supper with my wife and girls.”

“We weren't expecting you until Sunday.”

“I thought I needed to stop by more often.” He looked around the yard. “You’ve done a lot of work.”

“Topper has done a lot of work. He’s a Godsend. I’m very grateful to have someone here to help every day.” Victoria saw Josiah wince, and she felt a twinge of guilt for calling him out. Josiah was providing them a living by working in town. He made sure their every need was met – normally in the form of several large boxes of groceries or other things when he visited the farm on Sundays. But it wasn’t the same as having a husband who was there every night. She needed to harden her heart towards him.

She looked down at her hand. It was bare where a ring should have been. Perhaps Josiah didn’t consider them married?

“I’m glad he’s here to help you,” Josiah said. “It looks like the chickens are doing well.” He pointed to the birds with his hat. “What else do you need?”

A husband who is home every night. A father to two precious girls. But she didn’t say anything. Gazing out towards the barn she saw Topper watering the horse and rubbing it down with straw. “Might as well get cleaned up. Supper will be ready soon.” She

disappeared inside the house, leaving Josiah on the porch.

She walked to the table where she had been peeling potatoes for supper. Poking at the hard spuds with the tip of her knife she moved them around and counted the number of pieces. There wasn't enough for an extra guest.

"Can I help, Ma?"

Victoria turned to find Winnie standing next to her. She wrapped her hand around the little girl's head and pulled her close. Every time the girls called her Ma, her heart swelled with pride. It was Jane's suggestion and Winnie quickly chimed in her agreement. How could she refuse such a precious request?

"You can get me two more potatoes from the bucket. Your uncle is here for dinner."

"Uncle Josiah?" Victoria nodded. "Is it Sunday?"

"No. It's a special treat that he came to visit."

"Uncle Josiah!" Jane called and ran to wrap her little arms around his legs. "Are you having dinner with us?"

"If that is alright with Victoria. I didn't let her know I was coming."

Jane climbed into a chair at the table. "Mama, is it alright?"

Victoria's eyes flew to Josiah, who winced once more at the affectionate term. "Of course, it is alright. This is his home, too."

Jane picked up the potato Winnie brought back to the table. "If it is his home, why does he stay in town?"

Victoria put her hand on her hip. "Why don't you ask him?"

"I can see I came at a bad time," Josiah said. "I just wanted to see you."

Victoria lifted her hand and wiped the hair that had fallen against her brow. "It's alright. I'm just tired. Let me get these potatoes on. They'll be ready in about twenty minutes."

"I can cut them, Ma," Winnie said, taking the knife from Victoria's hand. "Wanna watch me, Uncle Josiah?"

"Have a seat," Victoria directed. "I'll get you a cup of coffee."

Josiah hung his hat on the peg near the door and moved to the table. He watched Winnie peel the potato gently with the knife, then cut them in chunks before placing them in the pot of water. When she was done, Victoria carried the pot to the stove, placed it over the heat and covered it with the iron lid.

“We are just having steak for dinner tonight. I didn’t get a chance to make the stew this morning.”

“Steak is fine.”

Victoria pulled out a large pan and a jar of bacon grease. She spooned out a lump of grease and put it in the pan, knocking the spoon several times, a bit louder than necessary, against the side of the pan.

“Excuse me,” Topper said. “I’ll take my meal in the barn, miss. I don’t want to disturb your visit.”

“Nonsense,” Victoria insisted. “You are part of the family too. Just grab a seat.” She checked on biscuits she had put in the oven right before Josiah arrived. They were golden brown. Using her apron, she lifted the handle and took the hot pot to the table. “Winnie, can you get the butter?”

“Can I get the jam, Ma?” Jane asked.

“Of course, sweetheart.” Victoria looked at Josiah. “We made mulberry jam. The trees are filled with the berries.”

“I bet that is good,” Josiah said softly.

“It is,” Jane insisted. “Do you want to try?” She placed the jar on the table and opened the top. Taking a spoon, she pulled a bit out of the jar and offered it to Josiah. He opened his

mouth to take the treat and Jane shoved the spoon in. "Is it good?"

Josiah nodded. "Very good."

"Here, Topper," she said, refilling the spoon.

"Very good indeed," the older man replied.

Victoria tested the potatoes with a fork. They were done. She scooped them from the water with a slotted spoon and placed them in a large bowl. Adding butter and a bit of milk, she mashed them until they were creamy white and fluffy.

She placed the bowl on the table and turned to get the steaks from the pan. She could make a bit of gravy from the oil and drippings left in the pan, but she really wanted to eat so Josiah could leave. Having him in the house made her nervous. Not that he would ever hurt them.

It was much deeper than that.

Victoria craved his company. She would see him for a few hours every week and then he'd kiss her on the cheek and disappear until the following Sunday. Each week she longed for that quick press of his lips against her cheek.

Now, with him just arriving without notice, it made it that much more difficult to handle

the thought of him leaving her once more.

She placed the platter full of steaks on the table and took her seat. Lifting Winnie's hand and Topper's, she looked at Josiah. "Will you say the blessing?"

Josiah's strong timbre filled the room as he asked the Lord's blessing over the meal. When he was done, he gave a low *amen*.

"Amen," Topper said. "Let's eat. I'm starved."

"That's because you did all that work today," Victoria said, dropping a mound of potatoes on Jane's and Winnie's plates. She served herself and passed the bowl to Topper who had already placed three biscuits on his plate.

Josiah placed a steak on his plate. Victoria watched as he cut it into small bites and slid half onto each of the girl's plates. Victoria wanted to cry. He was such a good father to them. Why didn't he come around more often?

"What did you do today?" Josiah asked Topper. "You've done a great job fixing up the house and the barnyard."

"We put a fence around the vegetable garden," Topper replied, slathering a biscuit with butter and a dollop of jam.

Josiah filled his plate. "Probably keeps the

critters out,” he mused.

“Not critters. Just one,” Victoria said, dragging her steak through the mashed potatoes. The meat was tender, but the potatoes were rather plain. She wished she had made gravy.

“Just one?”

Victoria nodded. “Rags keeps eating my garden. I don’t know why. Won’t touch the scraps we leave him.”

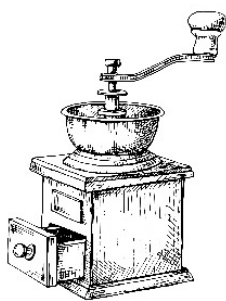
“Rags?”

“Yes. Rags. He was here the day we moved in. I call him that because of his fur. It looks like a bunch of rags. I’ve never seen a dog with fur like that.”

“Victoria?” Josiah wiped his mouth on his napkin and put it on the table.

“Yes?”

“Robert didn’t have a dog.”



CHAPTER TEN



Josiah was laughing so hard, he had tears rolling down his face.

“It’s not funny,” Victoria insisted.

They were standing on the porch while the girls washed the dishes after dinner. Topper had returned to the barn with a pot of hot coffee to keep him company all night.

“But it is, Victoria,” Josiah said, wiping his eyes. “That’s a goat.”

“A goat?” Rags stood under the tree and looked at them before giving a loud bleat and running into the field. “I’ve never seen a goat that looks like that. And it has a collar. Who puts a collar on their goat?”

“Robert did. It kept wandering off, so he’d

tie it to a tree. It's an angora and in desperate need of being shorn." He gave a little snort. "A dog..."

"I've never had a pet."

Josiah put his arm around Victoria's shoulders. He felt her stiffen for a moment, and then relax as he led her back to the house. It was heady being so close to her. Perhaps Archie was right. He was a fool. He stopped in front of the door and used his hand to keep the door closed, as he wanted just a moment more alone with the woman who was his wife.

"I noticed the girls calling you Ma."

Victoria's eyes snapped to his. "Is that a problem? Jane asked. I never encouraged it."

"Not at all. I think it is good that the girls have a mother again. You've done a remarkable job with them."

"I enjoy it. They are delightful and so smart. Winnie knows all her letters and can perform simple mathematics. Jane is starting to read."

"You've been teaching them?"

"Yes. I found some old books in the closet when we were cleaning things out."

"Robert would be very proud of them."

"You should be proud of them too."

“I am.”

“They need a father as well.”

Josiah studied her for a minute. Her hair was plastered against her head from the heat of the stove, stray pieces now curled around her head. Her cheeks were flushed, and her lips were open slightly.

Josiah saw her tongue quickly swipe her bottom lip. There was a dirt smudge on her cheek. He reached out and brushed it away with his fingers. Her breath quickened and he could see her pulse at the base of her neck. “Victoria,” he whispered moving closer.

Victoria lifted her head in invitation. Josiah wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her closer. As he leaned his head down to capture those lips that were tempting him, she turned her head away and pressed her palms against his shoulders. He stepped back and looked at her.

Maybe he misread her signals?

Victoria turned her head slowly to look at him once more. “Why are you here, Josiah?”

Josiah dropped his arms and moved to the edge of the porch. Digging in the pocket of his breeches, he pulled out the ring and held it in front of her. “I came to give you this.”

Victoria looked at the ring. “Why?” Her

voice croaked. "Why now?"

"Because I've been called a fool."

Victoria snorted. "I never called you that."

Josiah shook his head. "No. It was a man much wiser than I am." He held the ring out closer for her inspection. "I'd like for you to have this. It is only fitting that my wife has the ring I should have gotten her the day we married."

"But I'm not your wife. I'm your wife in name only. You even said we could seek an annulment at six months."

Josiah shrugged. "I said a lot of things." He lowered his hand. "Is that what you want?"

Victoria bit her bottom lip. "It doesn't have to be that way."

"I'd like you to take the ring."

"Are you still going to stay in town?"

Josiah shrugged. "I have a lot of work at the shop. I was thinking of hiring someone to help."

"Help with what?"

"I am receiving a dozen orders a week for new suits. I guess Archie Gordon has decided I'm the shop that the new agents will buy from."

"That's wonderful," Victoria said.

Josiah could hear a bit of sadness in her voice. "What is it?"

"I guess you do need to be in town."

"What would you like, Victoria?"

"I'd like for you to be here with me and the girls. For us to have a chance at being a real family."

"I'd like that too. I've put an advertisement in the window to hire a seamstress."

"To help sew?" Josiah nodded.

"I can help you do that. I can do it in the evenings while we are together. Then you won't have to hire someone."

"I can't ask you to take on that burden. It is a lot..."

"Hush." Victoria moved forward and placed her finger against his lips. "If we are going to be married, then we need to do things together. I expected to work the farm with Robert because he was going to be my husband. I should expect the same from you. I'd be more than happy to help."

"Will you take my ring, Victoria?"

"Yes," she sobbed, holding out her hand. "Of course, I will, Josiah."

Josiah slid the gold band on her finger and brought her hand to his mouth, kissing the

ring. "I promise we can make this work."

"Oh, Josiah," Victoria said, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I'm so happy." She stood up on tiptoes and pressed her lips against his.

Josiah leaned back against the porch rail and pulled her tightly against him, deepening the kiss.

When he finally lifted his head, they were both breathless. Victoria's eyes sparkled and her mouth turned up in a grin.

"Are you done kissing now?" Winnie asked through the screen door.

Josiah laughed. "I think we are." He gave a little kiss on Victoria's nose and led her inside to make their future plans.



"I think these are the best mud pies I've ever seen," Victoria said, wiping her hands on her apron.

"We'll leave them here in the sun to dry, and there is time for you girls to take a bath before your father comes home."

The children were thrilled that Josiah was coming home every evening. Topper still helped around the farm and Josiah hired men to build him a proper home so Topper

wouldn't have to sleep in the barn. Work was due to begin on the house within a week.

The demand for suits continued to climb and Josiah hired a tailor who was very handy with a needle.

He talked Josiah into ordering a sewing machine from a catalog. Said it would make tailoring clothes that much faster. Victoria still did repairs on some of the items Josiah brought home. She would rock next to the fire and sew whatever garment needed to be worked on. Then she would press it and wrap it in linen for Josiah to take back to the store in the morning.

At night, they would crawl into bed and Victoria would fall asleep in her husband's arms. She had never felt so safe or loved before.

"I don't want to take a bath," Jane said. "I want to play."

"Five more minutes, then you'll have to come in. I don't want potatoes growing out of your ears." She rolled back on her heels and stood, shaking the dirt from her apron. It was a nice diversion, playing with the children. "Winnie, I'm going to go heat the water. Keep an eye on your sister, please."

"Yes, Ma."

As she walked towards the house, she heard the sound of a buggy racing up the road. Holding her hands above her eyes to shield her gaze from the sun, she didn't recognize the carriage or the two men riding towards the house.

"Topper!" she called.

The older man came from around the side of the barn. "What is it, missus?"

"We have company. I don't recognize them."

Topper knew most of the people on the outskirts of town. "Don't recognize them either. Might be the builder Mr. Josiah talked about."

Victoria nodded. "You are right. I did forget about that."

"I'll tell them to come back later."

"Thank you, Topper. Dinner will be ready in about an hour."

"Yes'um," he replied, starting down the road.

A strange feeling built up in her belly. It was as if she was being warned about the people riding up. Topper could handle it. She saw that he had already grabbed the rifle that leaned against the barn during the day.

“Girls. Let’s go inside now.”

“But Ma...”

“Now,” Victoria insisted. “I want you inside where it is safe.” *Safe*? There was never any reason for her to worry about their safety before.

“Coming, Mama,” Jane said. She pushed herself up as the buggy came close to the house.

Victoria’s nerves started racing. Grabbing Jane, she put the child on her hip and grabbed Winnie’s hand. “You can wash your hands in the bucket,” she said, dragging them inside. She gave one last glance out the screen door before moving to the sink. Putting a bucket underneath the water pump, she filled it with cold water. It would have to do for now.

She lowered the bucket to the ground and handed Winnie a sliver of soap. “Wash your sister’s hands well before touching anything.” Winnie lowered her hands into the bucket and Victoria saw the mud swirl in the water. “Stay inside, I’ll be right back.”

Taking the shotgun from above the fireplace, she opened it to make sure that there were two shells inside.

“Why do you need a gun, Ma?” Winnie asked, her brown eyes going wide.

“I don’t know. Just stay inside.” Victoria walked on the porch.

The buggy had pulled close to the barn. One of the men was standing on the ground, talking to Topper. The other still sat in the buggy. Victoria didn’t recognize the man sitting there. She saw Topper point towards the house, and the man in the buggy turned, spying Victoria on the porch. He was older, maybe around her father’s age with graying hair and beard.

“Hello!” he called. “Are you Victoria Rossi?”

*Why would a stranger be looking for her?
And how would he know her unmarried name?*

She pressed the rifle closer to her leg, hiding it in the folds of her skirt. “Who’s asking?”

The man climbed down from the wagon. “I came to see Miss Rossi from Uniontown, New Jersey.” He moved closer to the house.

“That’s far enough,” Victoria said, lifting the rifle. “I don’t know you.”

“But you know me,” a voice that Victoria would never forget called from behind the buggy. A man in a dark suit covered with travel dust walked around the horses and stood next to the older man. “Is that any way

to greet your husband, Victoria?"

Victoria gasped and leaned forward, holding onto the porch railing for support. No! It couldn't be! She couldn't let him see her fear. She moved her feet closer to the edge of the porch and lifted herself slightly using the rail. "What do you want, Byron?"

"This man says he's your husband, Mrs. Altland," Topper explained, pointing at Byron with a gnarled finger.

"My husband isn't here. If you wish to speak to him, you may find him at the haberdashery in town. In the meantime, I think you need to get off my land."

Byron moved forward. "Victoria," he seethed.

"Move," Victoria's voice took on a hardened tone as she leveled the rifle at Byron's middle. She had never actually shot one before, and she didn't want to use shooting Byron as her introduction to firearms.

"Ma'am," the older man said, raising his hands. "My name is Ivan [Durkheim](#) and I work for a law firm in New Jersey. My partner represented your father's interests before his passing."

"What was your partner's name?"

"Name?" the man said blinking several

times. “Why Mortimer DeLuca.”

“Why didn’t he come?”

“Mr. DeLuca passed away, unexpectedly. I’ve taken over his clientele.”

Victoria noticed Byron had moved closer to the porch. “I said stop,” she demanded, lifting the rifle a little higher, and placing the stock against her shoulder. “I’m not sure who you are, Mr. Durkheim but if Mr. Foster doesn’t step back, I’m going to end up shooting you both.”

Byron threw back his head and laughed. “You still have fire, Victoria. I look forward to taming you once we get home.”

She couldn’t believe her eyes when his body tilted forward, and the sound of his laughter reached her ears. The toad did not think she could defend herself! She cocked the rifle and the laughter stopped.

“Now, ma’am, I do not think that is necessary at all. Your husband has just come to collect you, and we have some legal matters to discuss.” Mr. Durkheim pressed, with his hands stretched out in front of him.

“My husband? Really Byron? I’m fairly certain that my husband, *Josiah*, did not send my abuser and his attorney to collect me and scare our children.”

“Let me explain,” Mr. Durkheim pleaded. “I had stopped by the house to finalize the documents for your wedding, and they said that you were away, however, before you can get married there are things that need to be settled.” The other man pressed, and Byron was now grinning at her, a look of glee on his face.

“You had promised yourself to me,” Byron spoke, “The bans had been read, and then suddenly you were gone. We’ve worked very hard to find you and assure my sister that nothing had happened to you. She has been worried sick. Did you know you can be institutionalized for leaving me?”

“I made no such promise.” She felt her fingers tighten on the barrel of the shotgun.

“I did see that the bans had been listed in the paper, miss,” the attorney spoke.

“Yes, my stepmother, his sister had insisted that we would be married, or I would die. I fled two days before the wedding to safety.” She explained herself, though the urge to run away now was strong as well. If she could only be sure that the girls would be able to keep up.

“And you say that you are currently married?” Mr. Durkheim pressed.

“I am, I have been for nearly two months.” She nodded.

“Who would marry you?” Byron mocked.

“That would be me.” All three faces turned to find Josiah sitting on his horse by the fence. Mr. Gordon was on a horse next to Josiah, along with another man that Victoria didn’t recognize. “Who are you, and what do you want with my wife?”

“Ivan Durkheim, of DeLuca, Durkheim and Dillard. I am an attorney from Uniontown, New Jersey.”

Victoria looked at Josiah, but his eyes were focused on Byron. She didn’t see them ride up, so she wondered how long the riding party had been there.

“Victoria,” he said quietly. She could hear the fury just underneath this voice. “Go in the house.” He slid from the horse and dropped the reins before walking towards the porch, putting himself between Byron, the attorney, and Victoria.

She didn’t want to leave him.

“Ma?” a small child’s voice called through the door.

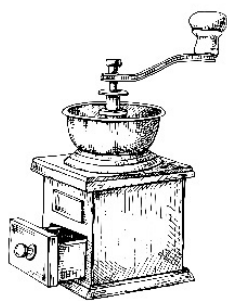
Victoria looked at Winnie and Jane who were staring through the screen door. Their eyes were opened wide in fear. She turned

back to Josiah. "I-"

"You need to go inside, now. Let me handle this. Do whatever you were doing before our guests arrived." Josiah's tone was hard, and his gaze never wavered from the men in front of him.

She leaned the shotgun against the porch, just within reach should Josiah need it, and slowly went back into the house.

She would bathe the girls and check the stew, confident that Josiah could handle whatever was about to happen.



CHAPTER ELEVEN



Josiah waited until he heard the door close before releasing a breath. When Archie came to the store, Josiah couldn't believe what he was told. After Marianne mentioned something to her husband about Victoria's family, Archie sent a wire to the New York office to find out more.

The Pinkertons had gotten word that Victoria's step-uncle was in town with another man and looking for her. Josiah wondered what kind of network the detective agency had in which information traveled so quickly.

In fear that the men may be headed towards the farm, Josiah wasted no time in closing shop and racing home. His greatest fears were confirmed when he saw the two men standing in the barnyard.

“Well at least she’s learned to obey, in her time away,” Byron sneered as the door to the house closed.

Josiah stared at the man. He had heard Victoria cry in her sleep about the mistreatment from her step-relatives.

“In her time away?” Josiah cocked his head, he was sure that he knew who this man was but he wanted to hear him say the words.

Byron grinned, and Josiah shuddered as he saw tobacco-stained teeth appear from behind curled lips. There was something truly evil about the man. No wonder Victoria ran away. “It will serve her well when I take her back to Uniontown. She’s been missed.”

“Over my dead body,” Josiah warned.

Byron tilted his head to the side. “That can be arranged.”

“Why you,” Josiah released the fists at his side and stepped forward.

“Wait,” Mr. Durkheim said, putting his hands out. “My client believes that he and Miss Rossi had a formal agreement to be wed. When she disappeared days before the wedding, he began to search for her. It wasn’t until recently we received word that a woman matching her description had gotten off the train in Denver a few weeks ago.”

"I'm sorry you wasted your time. But Miss Rossi and I have been married for nearly two months. We have a family."

"I heard about your brother in town, my condolences," Mr. Durkheim said. "But that still doesn't settle the matter at hand."

"I think it does," Josiah said. "My wife asked you to leave the property. You are scaring our children. I can direct you to the person who married us if you need further proof that his claim of matrimony was a sham." He almost grinned when he saw the Pinkerton Detectives remove their guns from their holsters. These men were not going to allow anyone to take or harm Victoria.

"I understand your claim on your wife, Sir. I do still need to speak with her about her father's will, at your convenience of course."

"This is ridiculous," Byron shouted, throwing his hands in the air.

"Mr. Foster, why don't you return to the boarding house in town and let me get this sorted," the attorney offered.

"No!" Byron said. "I'll settle this now." He pushed Topper to the ground and grabbed the rifle the old man was holding. Leveling it at Josiah, he cocked the gun and fired.

Josiah jumped back, as a bevy of gunfire

filled the air. Grabbing his belly, he was surprised to find that he hadn't been hit. He saw Byron grab the rifle, aim, and fire. He felt sure he would never see Victoria or the children again.

Mr. Durkheim laid on the ground with his hands protecting his head. Josiah could see the man shaking. Byron had dropped the rifle and his arm and leg were dripping blood. He looked at Josiah with such hatred before his eyes rolled in the back of his head and he slumped to the ground.

"He'll be alright," Archie said, sliding his gun back in the holster. "It was a non-fatal shot." He dismounted his horse and walked over. "Bronco, help me get him the buggy. We need to get him to the doctor."

"Why don't you just string him over the horse?"

"Too messy."

The tall Indian walked over and picked up the bleeding man as if he weighed no more than a sack of apples, and placed him in the back of the farm wagon sitting next to the barn. "Can you hitch up a horse, old man?" Bronco asked Topper, as he took a pair of irons and put one around the bottom of the wagon bench and another on Byron's arm.

“Sure thing, boss.” Topper walked by the wagon and spit on the man lying there. “Good thing that rifle is never loaded.”

Josiah turned when he heard the door open. Victoria peeked out and then slammed the door open before running down the porch and into Josiah’s arms. “You aren’t hurt, are you?”

Josiah shook his head. “No. Mr. Gordon managed to wound him.”

“What’s going to happen to him?” Victoria asked.

“He is wanted in several states, along with his wife,” Archie explained.

“His wife?” Victoria asked. “He wasn’t married.”

“He was married to a woman they called *the demon*.”

“The Demon? Desdemona! Oh, my goodness,” Victoria said. She leaned into Josiah’s arms as he watched the color drain from her face.

“She would marry rich men and they would mysteriously die after a year or two of marriage. I think Byron was responsible for selecting the men.”

“But she was married to my father for

years.”

Archie shrugged. “She either loved him, or there was another reason for it.”

“Poor Jezebel. What’s going to happen now,” Victoria asked.

“The authorities are taking Desdemona Foster into custody.”

“What will happen to my sister?”

“She’s not your sister,” Mr. Durkheim said as he brushed the dust from the front of his suit.

“What do you mean?” Josiah asked.

“Miss Rossi, I mean Mrs....”

“Altland,” Josiah provided.

“Mrs. Altland. Your father had his suspicions that Jezebel wasn’t his child. It appears that the good doctor was paid a hefty sum to fudge the dates of your stepmother’s pregnancy.”

“That poor girl.”

“She’s destitute. Penniless.”

“But everything went to Desdemona, wouldn’t it go to Jezzie?”

“Actually no. That is why it was so important for me to see you and validate Mr. Foster’s claim. The marriage was a fraud. Your father thought Byron had caught onto him

knowing something, so he had his will changed. I'm sorry I wasn't in town when you came looking for Mr. DeLuca. Everything should come to you. You are a very wealthy woman, Mrs. Altland."

"What about my sister?" Victoria said.

"She's not your sister, honey," Josiah said softly.

"She may not be by blood. But I grew up thinking she was my sister. Now she'll be on the street or an orphanage."

"What are you thinking?" Mr. Durkheim asked.

"I didn't have the money before, so it means nothing to me. I think that part of it should be used to fund Jezebel's education until she turns eighteen. A boarding school, perhaps. Then her expenses will be taken care of. After that, she's on her own."

"That's very generous of you, Mrs. Altland. I can write the papers up while I'm here and file them when I get back to New Jersey."

Victoria nodded.

"Is there anything else?" Josiah asked.

"I have some more papers for Mrs. Altland to sign, but they can wait until tomorrow. May I stop by?"

“Come at noon. I’ll be here,” Josiah said. He wasn’t about to leave his wife alone again.

Mr. Durkheim climbed in the buggy and situated himself on the seat. “Until tomorrow.”

“What about me?” Byron called from the back of the wagon. “You’re my lawyer. You can’t leave me here.”

“Mr. Foster, I do not have a license to practice law in Colorado. I’m afraid you are on your own.”

Josiah chuckled as Mr. Durkheim led his wagon away from the farm.

“We need to go too,” Archie said. He tapped Bronco on the shoulder. “Let’s go. We have to get Mr. Foster to a doctor and then to the jail.”

“Want me to take him?” Topper asked once the horse was hitched.

“If you can.”

“You bet your badges, I will,” Topper said, climbing in the wagon. He leaned over and looked at Byron. “You alright back there? Hang on. It is going to be a bumpy ride to town.”

Byron growled as he tried to roll over in the wagon. The irons held him tight.

“I know Marianne would like to see you

again, Mrs. Altland. I haven't been a big proponent of what I call her little hobby, but I do know she has one-hundred percent success with her matches."

"I'd like that. She has an open invitation to call on me anytime."

"Good day then." Josiah and Victoria watched as Archie and Bronco mounted their horses and turned away to head back towards the city.

"Yah!" Topper said, turning the wagon around. "I'll be back late."

Josiah went fishing in his pocket and pulled out a key. "Stay at the apartment above the haberdashery," he said, pressing the key in Topper's hand.

"Thank you kindly, Mr. Josiah. Let's go, horsey, yah!" he said slapping the reins on the horse. The horse took off with a lurch, and traveled down the road, with Byron complaining from the back of the wagon.

Josiah put his hands on Victoria's shoulders and turned her around to face him. "I was so worried," he said pulling her close. "I wouldn't survive if anything happened to you."

Victoria wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest. "Yes,

you would. You'd do what you needed to do for those little girls."

"Like marry you?"

"Like marry me."

Josiah gave a little laugh. "Have I told you how much I love you, Mrs. Altland?"

"No. But we can go inside, and you can tell me over and over again."

"I can do that," he said leaning down to capture her lips.

The sound of the screen door slamming caused him to lift his head.

"You done kissing her yet?" Winnie asked. "Jane and I gotta have a bath."

"Your bath can wait," Victoria called, and she pulled Josiah down for one more kiss.

Everything she wanted finally came true.

MARIANNE'S MAIL ORDER BRIDES

Check out the entire series!

Book 1 – A Match for Collette, by Lynn Donovan

Book 2 – A Match for Sarah, by Marlene Bierworth

Book 3 – A Match for Esther Rose, by Lynn Donovan

Book 4 – A Match for Hannah, by Marianne Spitzer

Book 5 – A Match for Willa, by Lynn Donovan

Book 6 – A Match for Victoria, by Christine Sterling

Book 7 – A Match for Althia, by Linda Carroll-Brand

*Book 8 – A Match for Clarissa, by Caroline
Clemmons*

Book 9 – A Match for Lilah, by Marisa Masterson

Book 10 – A Match for Polly, Laura Ashwood

Book 11 – A Match for Bernadette, Parker J. Cole

Book 12 – A Match for Judith, by Parker J. Cole

LEAVE A REVIEW



If you enjoyed this story, I would appreciate it if you would leave a review, as it helps me reach new readers and continue to write stories that appeal to you.

[Tap here to leave a review.](#)

[Join Christine's newsletter here.](#)

[Tap here to see all of Christine's books.](#)

[Click here to join the Chat, Sip & Read Readers Community.](#)

READ ALL OF CHRISTINE'S BOOKS



The Chapmans Series:

1. Owen
2. Oliver
3. Caleb
4. Everett
5. Alice
6. First Christmas at Flat River

The Blizzard Bride Series:

1. The Blizzard Brides
2. A Groom for Millie
3. A Groom for Heather
4. A Groom for Lauren
5. A Groom for Charity
6. A Groom for Fancy

Agate Bay, Minnesota Series:

1. Gretchen's Dilemma
2. Ava's Longing
3. Nettie's New Beginning

Mail Order Brides of Nomad, Montana

1. Bonnie's Brave Beau
2. Melina's Marvelous Mistake

The Hartman Series:

1. Annamae
2. Baxter
3. Rexford
4. Whitney
5. Verna
6. Vangie

The Silverpines Series:

1. Wanted: Medicine Man
2. Wanted: Gravedigger
3. Wanted: Redemption

The Silverpines Companion Tales:

1. The Coffin Maker
2. Snowbound
3. Changing Seasons

North and South Series:

1. His Civil War Bride
2. New York Bride

The Proxy Bride Romances:

1. A Bride for Jeremiah
2. A Bride for Elijah
3. A Bride for Benjamin

The Pinkerton Matchmaker Romances:

1. The Pinkerton Matchmaker
2. An Agent for Claudette
3. An Agent for Penelope
4. An Agent for Marianne
5. An Agent for Pearl

The Cowboys and Angels Romances:

1. Bride in Blue
2. Beauty and the Baker
3. Tempting the Tailor
4. Married by Midnight

The Belles of Wyoming Romances:

1. Wynter's Bride
2. The Homecoming
3. A Matter of Marriage
4. The Barn Raising

The Black Hills Brides Books:

1. Her Secret Past
2. Her Secret Baby
3. Her Secret Shame
4. Her Secret Love

The Christmas Books:

1. A Cozy Mitten Christmas
2. A Cowboy for Christmas
3. A Mother for Christmas

Read Christine's Other Books:

1. Gwyneth (Widows of Wildcat Ridge)
2. Moving from Maryland (Pioneer Brides of Rattlesnake Ridge)
3. Dancing to the Altar (Holliday Islands Resort #2)
4. Ezra's Forgetful Bride (Matchmaker Mix-up Book #7)
5. A Match for Victoria (Marianne's Mail

Order Brides #6)

Please visit Christine's Amazon page at:
www.christinesterling.com

ABOUT CHRISTINE STERLING



Christine Sterling independently published her first book in 2017. She writes sweet and wholesome historical westerns and sweet contemporary small town romance novels. She lives in Pennsylvania with her husband, a spoiled Shih Tzu, two German Shepherds and an energetic Border Collie, that keep her on her toes.

She spends her time writing, thinking about writing, and dreaming about writing. Her favorite things are a good cup of tea, puppy snuggles, a movie that will make you cry and hearing from her readers.

If you like this book, please take a few minutes to [leave a review](#) now! Christine appreciates it and you may help a reader find

their next favorite book!